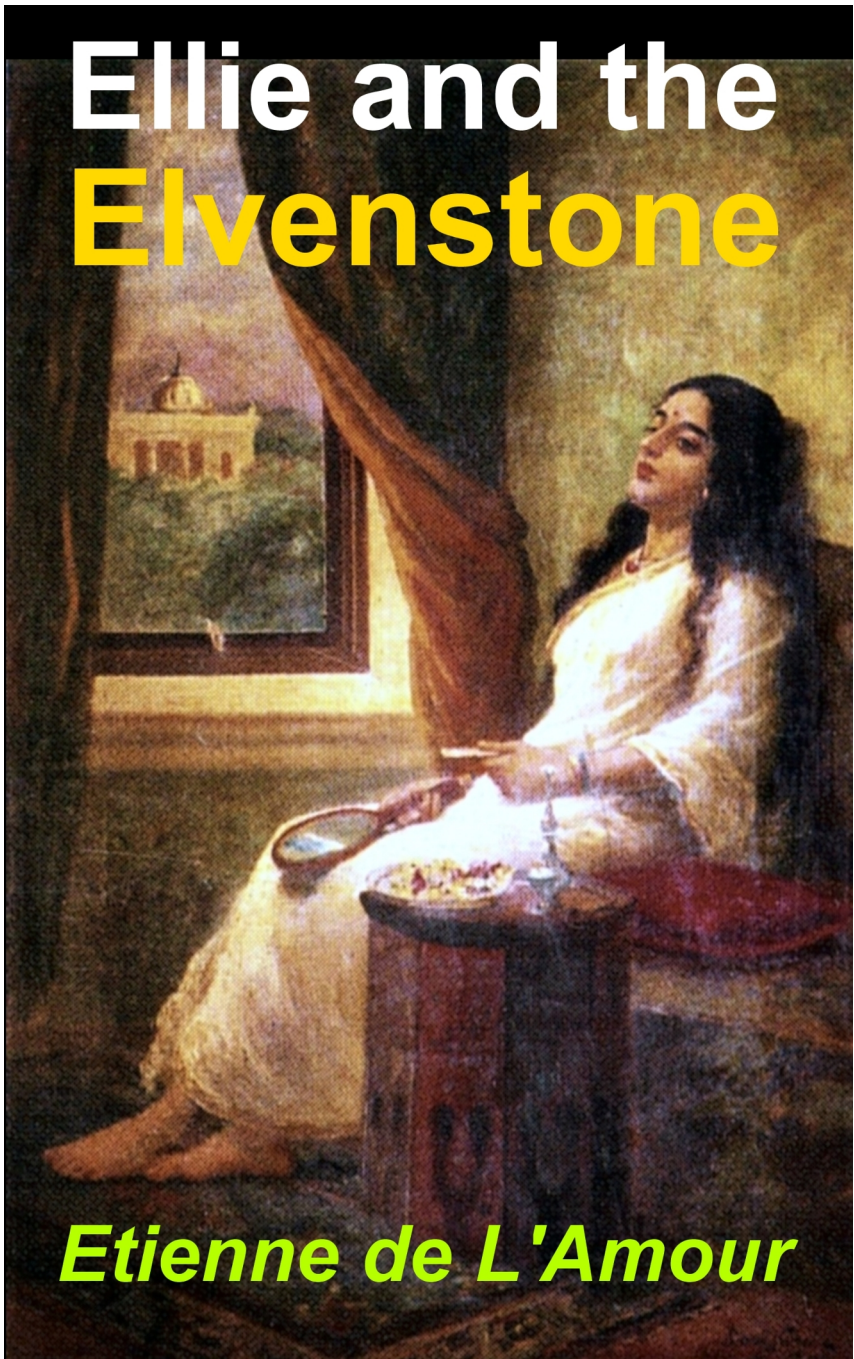


Ellie and the Elvenstone



Etienne de L'Amour

Ellie and the Elvenstone

First edition

By Etienne de L'Amour

A sequel to *DreamScape: In the Beginning*.

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Dedication

Dedicated to the young at heart.



1. An undignified landing

Little Ellie clambered eagerly upstairs, hurriedly said her prayers and jumped into bed. She slipped the DreamScape wristband on, fumbled with the catch and – racing through the on-screen menu – selected “Elvenglade” and hit the little green “Go” button. Little did she realize what a huge impact this was going to have on her life.

Within minutes of her head hitting the pillow, Ellie was fast asleep.

But when Ellie awoke, it was not to her comfortable bed in the warm bedroom back home in Zone Five, rather she landed with something of an undignified bump in long grass. Getting to her feet she looked around to find her bearings.

She'd come down in the middle of a familiar luxuriant meadow, not far from the banks of the babbling brook. The golden orb of the sun was already riding high and, with only wisps of cloud in the azure blue sky, it looked like she was in for a scorcher.

Ellie wished she'd brought a hat to protect her head – and no sooner were the thoughts formed than she found herself wearing a black felt hat with a wide brim. That's the way things worked in this magical realm she'd named Elvenglade. If you really needed something – not simply desired it out of greed – and if you happened to wish for it without trying to force the issue, sure enough, the object or the opportunity would arise. However, it would not always materialise in the way you expected it to.

Ellie brushed herself down and waded through the tall grass and wild flowers until she came to the dirt path which ran along the banks of the gently-flowing brook. She was heading for the cottage to meet up with her best friends, Bethany Sparkes and Gareth Jones.

Bethany was quite tiny, really, with long ginger hair and a face full of freckles. She was a regular Miss Know-It-All, but in a modest way, and her classmates used to call her the Walking Dictionary or the Talking Encyclopaedia. Mind you, there were some who didn't like her (who didn't count for much themselves),

like Neil Fletcher and his dastardly sidekicks Rees and Mogg. With nothing better to do, they were always cat-calling, saying that she was a greaser or teacher's little pet.

Gareth was a little taller than Ellie. He had tousled brown hair and, being particularly fond of his food but not having the nervous energy that the girls had, he was a shade overweight. He was quite brave and protective toward the girls, really.

How the three of them came to meet up at the SunnyDene Home for Wayward Children, a place run by a vindictive, battle-axe of a woman called Ms Arkwright, was another long story in itself.

Bethany's parents had been tragically killed in a car crash when she was just a baby and she'd spent most of her life in the Home. She'd told Ellie that she was quite lucky really because as she didn't remember her parents or what family life was like, then she didn't miss them in the same way that many of the other children did. A number of the younger children used to cry on a night and wet their beds.

Gareth told her that he didn't remember his father. His mother had brought him up until he was about six, then for some reason – perhaps because he cramped her style or because she'd gone off the idea – the woman had given him away.

For her part, Ellie had ended up in SunnyDene through an accident. She'd managed to get herself stranded down in Sher Point and she'd lost her memory. So she was sent to the Home allegedly whilst her parents were traced. They hadn't tried very hard in that regard. Fortunately for her, however, her father had eventually found her and had taken her away from that awful place.

Bethany and Gareth weren't that lucky: they were still stuck there. But there was one thing that evil woman Ms Arkwright couldn't take away from them – at least as long as she didn't confiscate their DreamScape wristpads – and that was their little bit of heaven in that disaster area – their dreams.



Ellie's friends were already waiting for her at the cottage when she arrived, and before she'd managed to open the twisted gate they were running down the crazy-paved garden path to greet her.

"It's so good to see you again, Ellie," Bethany enthused as Gareth picked her up and swung her round in his strong arms.

They wandered through the fragrant rose garden, past the lily pond where the fountain erupted from the mouth of a statue carved into the shape of a winged god and played on the water, and over to the picnic table overlooking the stream.

Meanwhile, Bethany disappeared inside the cottage and after a few minutes beavering away in the kitchen she emerged carrying a large wicker tray piled high with sandwiches.

"There you are," she said: "Prawn and mayonnaise for you, Ellie."

"My favourite," she beamed. "You remembered."

"Not just a pretty face, you know. And I made them myself."

Gareth muttered something about "not even a pretty face", but they knew he didn't really mean it.

Bethany could have conjured up the sandwiches if she'd wanted to, but life – or rather subsistence – being the way it was in SunnyDene, she liked to perform such simple pleasures herself whenever she got the opportunity.

"... Ham and sweetcorn relish for you, Gareth ..."

"Wow! Thanks," said Gareth, casting aside his table manners and diving straight in.

"... And cheese and chutney for yours truly. Now, what can I offer you in the way of drinks?"

"Allow me," said Gareth and he must have been making a wish because he conjured up a banana milkshake for himself out of nowhere.

"And what about ours?" Ellie asked. It wasn't the first time Gareth's wishful thinking had selectively misfired in this way.

"Oh, sorry," he said, munching his way through his second round of sandwiches.

"No problem," lilted Bethany and she disappeared back inside the cottage to return with a cola for Ellie and a fresh orange juice for herself.

They planned to have an easy time that first day, simply relaxing in the heat of the day on the folding sun beds they'd found in the rickety old garden shed. While Gareth was having a little siesta, she and Bethany popped inside to have a mooch through the library in the living room, looking for something

interesting to while away the time.

It wasn't long before Bethany had found herself a bumper book of cryptic crosswords, but Ellie wasn't having much luck. Maybe she was trying too hard? She closed her eyes, groped around the shelves, found a little leather-bound book she liked the feel of, pulled it from the shelf and followed Bethany back outside.

2. The treasure hunt

Only when she'd settled herself comfortably on one of the sun beds did Ellie take a look at the book she'd located. Hmm. *The Treasure Hunt*, eh? Now that sounded rather interesting.

When Ellie opened the slim book, however, she was rather bemused to find that all the pages were blank. She flicked carefully through the whole book just to be sure.

"Found something interesting to read?" enquired Bethany.

"Have a look yourself." Ellie tossed the book over to Bethany. And as she did, a little scrap of paper fell from in between the pages and fluttered to the ground. She leant over the side of the sun bed to pick it up. No, it wasn't paper, it was more like a fine parchment, and there were words written on it in faded brown ink.

"*The Treasure Hunt*, huh?" Then: "But just a minute – all the pages are blank!"

"All but one," Ellie replied and she waved the scrap of parchment in the air.

"What's it say?"

"It looks like some kind of poem," Ellie said. "Listen:"

*The realm is in turmoil
Lord Develin seeks power
If you want to save the day
You must leave within the hour.
Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together
And take it to Abshaur.*

"It's a treasure hunt!" decided Bethany, quick as a flash, and she tossed the book back into Ellie's lap. "Sod these crosswords – anyone game for a laugh?"

"There's more," said Ellie:

*But before you do this
You must solve this clue
And then you'll surely know
What you must first do.*

*Find something twisted
And turn to the west
Walk straight for a league
'Til you find a place to rest.
I'm old and I'm gnarled
There's a hole inside me
I could hide somebody
From the wicked enemy.*

“It's like a riddle,” said Gareth, opening his eyes and squinting in the strong sun. “Let's have another look.”

Bethany went across to look over his shoulder.

“Okay, gang, this is what we must do first: 'Find something twisted'.”

When nothing instantly sprang to mind, Bethany decided they should search the cottage from top to bottom in a systematic fashion, starting with the attic, working down through the bedrooms and bathroom and finally down to the kitchen and living room.

They found nothing remotely twisted.

They moved outside and searched the back garden and the shed and through the rose garden at the front.

Still they found nothing.

Ellie was just about to begin searching up and down the path outside the cottage when her hand lit on the garden gate.

“The twisted gate!” both she and Bethany said almost in unison.

“Snap!” Bethany laughed and they hooked their little fingers together and shook hands.

Ellie took the scrap of parchment back off Gareth. “And turn to the west’,” she read. “But which way is west?”

“Anyone see a compass on their travels?” asked Bethany. Though they'd searched the house from top to bottom and had been in all the cupboards and drawers, nobody had come across a compass, and for some reason, try as they might they could not conjure one up.

“Now let me think,” said Gareth, scratching his chin. “If it's the same here as Sher Point, the sun rises in the east, travels through the south by midday, and sets over in the west.”

They'd seen a sunset in Elvenglade before. “Over towards the

gap between those two hills,” Ellie pointed.

“What about this bit, though? ‘Walk straight for a league’? How long’s a league when it’s at home?”

“It varies,” came the reply from their resident talking encyclopaedia. “But it’s more usually taken as being about three miles.”

Gareth began to pace up and down. “I seem to recall that you can get a rough idea of how far you’ve gone by counting your paces,” he said. But then he gave up. “No, if nothing else we’d be bound to lose count.”

“How’s about we assume we walk at four miles an hour?” Bethany offered. “So why don’t we walk for about forty five minutes – give or take a bit – and see where that takes us?”

“Anybody got a watch?” Gareth asked. Everyone shook their heads, and again for some unknown reason they were again unable to conjure one up.

Then Ellie remembered: when she’d been upstairs she was surprised to see that there were clothes hanging up in the wardrobe in one of the bedrooms. She’d seen a dark grey suit in there – and there was an old-fashioned gold pocket watch tucked into a little pocket. She ran inside, went upstairs and into the wardrobe and unfastened the watch – it was attached to the suit by a long chain.

“Any idea what time it is?” she asked when she got outside again.

“It must be getting on for eleven o’clock by now,” said Gareth, looking up and shielding his eyes from the sun.

Ellie set the watch and wound it up. “Okay, gang, let’s hit the road!” she called, and they marched off down the path. The route took them away from the banks of the brook, skirting the edge of the wild flower meadow and up into the lush green canopy of the woods.

“So, how’s life treating you at the SunnyDene Home for Wayward Children?” Ellie asked, making polite conversation.

Gregory muttered something uncouth under his breath.

“That’s rather a sore topic at the moment, I’m afraid,” Bethany explained. “You remember Fletcher?”

How could she ever forget that disgusting child and his two confederates Rees and Mogg? “Go on ...”

“Well, they broke into the staff room and stole some of their biscuits. When Ms Arkwright found out, she called in Mr Dorkins and his dog Snapper. Apparently he used to be a sniffer dog, but he was a bit too temperamental, so the police let him go. And of course when they searched the dorms, what did they find? – the box containing the remaining biscuits – in Gareth's bedside locker. And so I'm afraid Gareth spent another couple of days in the Black Hole of Calcutta.” That's what they called the cupboard under the stairs.

“You know this Zone Five, Ellie, that you say you come from? I'm curious, because I've never seen it on a map.”

How could she explain it? “It's a different realm entirely, just as Sher Point – where you come from – and this place Elvenglade are different realms. You won't find Zone Five on a map, Bethany.

“It's so hard to explain. In simple terms, you know that there are all sorts of religions and spiritual ways in the world and different cultures. They mostly all believe that there's another place – like Heaven; some place you go to when you die, if you've been a good person. And a few people believe that you can go to such a realm before you die, providing that you achieve self knowledge, that you become sufficiently spiritually developed? Well, Zone Five is one such place.

“But for all the people who believe that this is possible or think that they are spiritual, or even feel that they are spiritual and that they know the truth, only a very, very few really Know. Only a very, very few really know of Zone Five's existence and the influence it has over life down in Sher Point. For this reason, my people say that 'Humanity is asleep'. Does that make any sense to you?”

Bethany didn't seem quite sure. “I think so,” she said at length. “And it would be really wonderful to visit such a place.”

Ellie thought about it for a minute. “Tell you what,” she said at last. “My father has several books on the subject ...” On second thoughts, maybe those were too heavy even for a voracious bookworm like Bethany? Then she remembered the two books she'd stumbled upon in the old bookshop some time back: *The Dreamwalkers* and *Time and Time Again*. “I'll see what I can root out for you next time we're here.”

“Well, chaps and chapesses,” Ellie said, consulting the

pocket watch and making allowances for their varied pace. "It's coming up to thirty five minutes now. Keep your eyes peeled for the next twenty minutes or so."

A few minutes later, Gareth who'd perhaps been piling in the calories but skimping on the exercise plonked himself down on an old fallen tree trunk by the side of the path. He did his best to conjure up something cool and refreshing, without apparent success. "Hang on a minute, you two," he puffed. "I need to stop and rest a while and get my breath."

Ellie and Bethany had been forging ahead and they had to turn back and retrace their last few steps.

"Looks like someone could do with this exercise," remarked Bethany, sitting herself down beside Gareth.

"I'll be alright," he huffed. "Anyhow, I thought this was meant to be a bit of a walk, not a blooming military route march!"

Ellie checked her pocket watch and made a mental note to add on time for stoppages.

They were in a bracken-strewn clearing now and she could see it all. There was a wonderful old oak tree standing in the centre of the glade. How she wished she could have brought a camera with her – it had all the makings of a stunning shot. It was quite deceptive, really. As they walked they hadn't appeared to be climbing, but looking back at the valley below it was clear they'd hiked up a fair way.

In the far distance – indeed all around – was a ring of wooded hills; down below, the brook was like a silver thread, meandering this way and that down the valley.

"What was that verse again, Ellie?" Bethany wanted to know.

Ellie took the little leather-bound book out of her pocket and found the page where she'd inserted the scrap of parchment.

She went over to sit down on the upturned tree trunk and shared the book as she read it out:

*The realm is in turmoil
Lord Develin seeks power
If you want to save the day
You must leave within the hour.
Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together*

And take it to Abshaur:

*But before you do this
You must solve this clue
And then you'll surely know
What you must first do.*

*Find something twisted
And turn to the west
Walk straight for a league
'Til you find a place to rest.*

*I'm old and I'm gnarled
There's a hole inside me
I could hide somebody
From the wicked enemy.*

"You know, it could be right under our noses and we might not know it," Bethany remarked. And then the light suddenly dawned on her. "Or right under our fat backsides!" she whooped.

"Come again?"

"Gareth, you're a genius and you just don't know it. Here, see:"

*Find something twisted
And turn to the west
Walk straight for a league
'Til you find a place to rest.*

She placed particular emphasis on the last line of the quatrain. "It's talking about the tree trunk, dippy!" Bethany roared and they all fell about laughing and kicking their legs in the air.

"OK, so what's next?" Bethany asked.

Ellie read the last verse out loud:

*I'm old and I'm gnarled
There's a hole inside me
I could hide somebody
From the wicked enemy.*

Gareth looked at the fallen tree trunk. "Well, it certainly looks old and gnarled, but I can't see any holes you could hide anybody in."

"No," said Bethany. "But that oak tree looks pretty old and gnarled to me."

They turned to look at it, then went over to have a closer look.

“Here, Gareth, give me a shin up, will you?”

“What are you doing, Bethany?”

“What's it look like I'm doing? I'm climbing the trunk of this tree, that's what.”

Gareth helped her up and eventually she was standing on his shoulders. It was fortunate that she was so petite. Then, grabbing a branch, she pulled herself right up and stood in the crook of the tree where the trunk split in two.

“Now you see me,” she called.

They looked.

“And now you don't,” came a muffled voice. True to her word, Bethany had disappeared. They went right up to the trunk of the tree and they could just see her waggling her finger tips at them through a split in the side of the tree trunk.

A few moments later, after quite a struggle, Bethany's head emerged from the great hole in the tree, followed by her body. Then she grabbed hold of the branch and carefully lowered herself as far as she could before dropping to her feet in the springy undergrowth.

“And that's not all I found,” she lilted, shoving a hand down the front of her jumper. She pulled her hand out and waved something in the air. Squatting on the floor, she took the piece of oiled leather and carefully unfolded it. And there in the centre, they saw another scrap of parchment with writing on it in ink, just like the first.

3. A fright

“So what's it say?” Gareth was anxious to know.

Bethany handed the piece of parchment to Ellie. Apparently she'd be elected group orator. She cleared her throat:

*Carry on along the way
'Til two men o' steel
Give you a fright.
Answer well the question asked
Is it wrong?
Or is it right?
My first is in cub, but not in scout
The rest, the top of a hill
You'll find me beneath the span
You will, you will, you will!*

“Any ideas, anyone?” she asked, looking for volunteers. She didn't know why, but for some reason the verse seemed to ring a bell somewhere deep in the cobweb-festooned cloisters of her head.

“Looks like we carry on down the road for now.” Bethany said, getting to her feet. “Come on you guys – wagons ho!”

Ellie slotted the piece of parchment in the leather-bound book with the other verse, put the book back in her pocket and they set off once more.

Before long and not a moment soon enough for Gareth, who'd been huffing and puffing most of the way, they reached the top of the hill and they were on their way back down the other side. It was difficult to tell exactly where they were heading now as they were back under the canopy of the trees.

“So what's it like in Zone Five?” asked Bethany, eager to find out more.

“Well,” answered Ellie. “There isn't that much to tell about Zone Five itself. But there's an awful lot to say if you compare it with Sher Point.”

“For example, there aren't nearly as many people living up there, so the place isn't built-up and congested like Sher Point is. But most of all, things aren't as – how can I put it? – discordant

up there. We don't have wars or natural disasters like earthquakes or famines. We haven't destroyed the environment in the same way."

She wondered how far she dare take this. "Zone Five is sustainable in the long-term. To put it bluntly, um ..."

"... Sher Point is doomed. That's what you're saying, isn't it?" offered Bethany. "You don't have to pull your punches. I'm a woman of the world – I know the score."

Bethany sighed deeply. "My elder sister Olivia says that the long term prognosis doesn't look at all good. Things are so bad in Sher Point that people call it the Earth Sickness. It's like a cancer, spreading through the whole organism. And the Sickness is beginning to make its effect felt 'Upstairs' in Zone Five, too. It's possible that the Experiment might have to be terminated.

"Part of the reason for this is an ancient catastrophe which sent the planet reeling. It put the planet out of alignment with the Source. Some folk still call the Link God's Will."

She could still picture the Council meeting she'd overheard through the keyhole. They'd been discussing the fate of Sher Point and the words would be forever etched in her mind. "And the other reason is that for aeons, Sher Point has been a dumping ground for all sorts of people that the Council on Zone Five took exception to; that and their countless offspring."

Damn it! She had to say it to get it off her chest, and yet she knew that she was going too far. Mum and Dad would go ape if they ever found out.

But Bethany didn't complain or ask her any awkward questions, she just took the information in and mulled it over in her mind. For his part, Gareth was simply gob-smacked.

Just then they came to a fork in the road. It came as a welcome and blessed relief.

"Which way now?" Bethany asked.

Suddenly there was a crashing in the trees on both sides and the three of them sprang back in alarm. Two knights in rusting armour had suddenly appeared, riding heavy horses. One was in red livery, the other in green. They had their shields up, their helmets down and their swords drawn, blocking the way ahead.

"What do you want?" Gareth demanded, but brave as he was he was no match for these mounted warriors. "We're not hurting

anyone. We're just out for a walk.”

Then: “Hey! This is only a dream, remember, guys! These are just phantoms. They can't hurt us. This is our dream!”

One of the figures flicked his spurred heels and drove his mount closer. He pressed the tip of his sword into Gareth's shoulder.

“Youch!” Gareth grimaced and staggered backwards. He felt his arm. He turned and showed Ellie and Bethany the blood on his finger tips. There was no question about it – the knights and their weaponry were very real indeed.

Bethany caught hold of Gareth and pulled him away. “What do you want with us?” she demanded, standing her ground.

Ellie reached in her pocket and flicked nervously through the book until she came across the scrap of parchment and she read it out aloud for the others:

*Carry on along the way
'Til two men o' steel
Give you a fright.
Answer well the question asked
Is it wrong?
Or is it right?*

So what was the question?

The green knight now began to speak. “One of the forks in this road leads toward your goal, the other to certain death ...”

She had it! It was just like the riddle she'd come across in the book she'd read: *The Dreamwalkers*! Perhaps it was because she'd read the book that the riddle was incorporated in the dream? Or perhaps she was destined to read it because she was to find herself faced by these knights at some time in her life?

“You may ask one of us a question to help you choose the right path. One of us will answer you truthfully, the other will lie,” said the red knight.

“Ask your question!” the green knight commanded.

Gareth was about to say something but Ellie ran forward and clapped her hand over his mouth. “I know this riddle,” she explained. My God, but what if she accidentally got it wrong?

She addressed the green knight. “If I were to ask your comrade which path leads to our true goal, what would he say?”

The green knight stood there for a time and then he

answered. “He would tell you that the left-hand path leads to your goal.”

Ellie could almost hear the cogs whirring and the pistons clanking in Bethany's analytical head, then her eyes lit up and she squeezed Ellie's hand. She'd worked the logic of the riddle out, too. Gareth was still turning it over in his mind.

“Can I?” she checked with Ellie.

“Sure,” she nodded, hoping to God that Bethany got it right.

“Then we choose the right-hand path.”

The two knights sheathed their swords and backed their great horses out of the way. “Then pass in peace, friends, and may good fortune travel with you.”

All the same, even though they were ninety nine percent certain they'd chosen the correct answer, with their very lives depending on it they still whistled with relief at the outcome and moved on as fast as their little legs would carry them.

4. The walking, talking thesaurus

“You were talking about things in Sher Point,” Bethany reminded Ellie, most likely to take their minds off the shocking encounter with the knights.

“Where was I? Oh, yes ... As I said,” Ellie continued, “only a very few people have even an inkling of what's going on ...”

“Carry on,” prompted Bethany as they turned a corner in the road and crossed over a narrow bridge.

In for a penny, in for a pound, eh? “OK. Dad says the rest are technically 'Asleep'. Sher Point is a prison to them – a huge open prison – and they're almost totally oblivious of the dire predicament they're in. Even the name itself – 'Sher Point' – is an anagram of 'The Prison'. Did you know that? Maybe that was some kind of sick joke on the part of the founders?”

Gareth was shaking his head in disbelief. “Jeez, Ellie. That is Heavy with a capital 'H'!”

“Sorry,” she said. “But Beth did ask. That's the sort of thing that a lot of the grown-ups in Zone Five have to worry about. But other than that, life can be pretty boring there. Everything's so squeaky clean. That's another down side. Things are a lot more exciting in Sher Point – and even more so in DreamScape.”

“So, where next?” asked Bethany when they were well clear of the two knights.

Her hands still shaking from their encounter and with a frog still lodged in her throat, Ellie read out the rest of the verse:

My first is in cub, but not in scout

The rest, the top of a hill

You'll find me beneath the span

You will, you will, you will!

“Well the first bit's easy,” said Gareth. “That's got to be the letter 'B'.”

“And 'the rest, the top of a hill'?” queried Ellie. “What's another name for the top of a hill?”

“Summit?” offered Gareth.

“Highland?”

“Crest?”

“Peak?”

“Pike?”

“Hilltop?”

“Ridge?”

“Hog's back?” That was Bethany the Walking, Talking Thesaurus, of course.

“Saddle?”

“Spur?”

“Col?”

Bethany's eyes lit up. “What did you say, Gareth?”

“I can't remember now: 'Spur'?”

“No, before that.”

“Ridge?”

Bethany went over and planted a great big wet sloppy kiss on his cheek. “That's it – 'b-ridge', don't you see? It's a bridge!”

Almost as one they turned on their heels and walked back to the little hump-backed bridge that they'd just crossed.

“Now what were the last lines, Ellie?”

She read it out again for them:

My first is in cub, but not in scout

The rest, the top of a hill

You'll find me beneath the span

You will, you will, you will!

Gareth took off his shoes and socks and waded into the cool waters of the stream to check under the bridge. He disappeared momentarily and tossed out a few small boulders, then finally he came out of the water with a little oiled-leather package in his teeth. He passed it to Bethany to unwrap while he dried out and Bethany passed it over to Ellie, the honorary orator.

5. Elzabet

Just then there was a faint rustling in the bushes to their left and, without speaking a word, Gareth picked up a stick laying close-by and sneaked across the path. Next second, he dived head first into the undergrowth, there was a good deal of commotion and cursing, and finally he emerged, dragging a creature out by the scruff of the neck. It was writhing around in his hands, doing its best to break free.

“Oh, please kind sir, don't hurt me!” the creature was screaming at the top of its voice. “Please to be putting me down this minute. I was meaning you no harm!”

Gareth dragged the creature over to the others, still holding on tightly to the back of its collar.

“Please sir, you are the life out of me throttling! I am pleading for mercy and begging your forgiveness. Please to be putting me down!”

Gareth dumped the creature unceremoniously down in the dirt. Instantly it tried to scuttle away. He grabbed it again by the scruff of its collar and plonked it back down again. “Now you stay there, you hear me? We're not done with you yet!”

Ellie looked at the creature in amazement. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before, except in children's storybooks. The creature was dressed in a long, silvery green cloak and a little cap with a bobble dangling on the end; knee length breeches and long boots with pointed toes. It couldn't have been much more than three feet tall and at first sight you might think that this was some child in fancy dress, but its size belied its age. It had big blue eyes and hair of silvery white and wrinkles creased its care-worn face and furrowed its brow.

“What were you doing there, lurking in the bushes, eh? Were you spying on us?” Gareth demanded, brandishing the stick and doing his best to appear menacing.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no, kind sir!” the creature replied. “I would not be doing such a thing to wayfarers like your good selves.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“If the truth be known, and begging your pardon kind sir and dear ladies, I was hiding.”

“Hiding from what?”

“There is much evil abroad in the land, these days, kind sir. I thought perhaps you were the dread Lord Develin's agents and that you might kill me and drink my blood.”

“Put the poor creature down, Gareth,” Ellie requested. He seemed to be going a little blue about the gills. Then to the creature: “You promise you won't try to escape? We mean you no harm.”

“Upon my honour, kind lady, I am giving you my word.”

Gareth released the creature and it sat down cross-legged between them.

“I'm Ellie,” she said, holding out a hand tentatively and hoping it wouldn't be bitten off. The creature didn't appear to know what to do with the hand, so she grabbed hold of his and shook it, to show him what to do. “And these are my friends Bethany and Gareth.”

The creature smiled. “And I am Elzabet.”

“What kind of a creature are you, um ... Elzabet?”

“Why a sylvan elf, of course,” retorted Elzabet as if anyone should know.

“Hang on ...” began Ellie.

“Hang on what?” asked Bethany.

“You mentioned Lord Develin ... She fished in her pocket, produced the book, looked at the first scrap of parchment again and read it out:

The realm is in turmoil

Lord Develin seeks power

If you want to save the day

You must leave within the hour ...

“That is right,” the elf said. “They say that the treacherous Lord Develin is to take control of Dun-Hallow plotting.”

“Dun-Hallow? Where's that?”

Elzabet pointed into the distance. “It is being a garrison town in Azakstan, the land to the south, between those hills and the distant mountains,” he explained.

And there was more:

*Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together
And take it to Abshaur.*

The creature's eyes lit up on hearing these words. "The return of the Elvenstone! My word, this was long ago prophesied. Even Lord Develin could not stand up to the magic of the Elvenstone."

"Have you any idea where the Elvenstone is?"

"It was said to have been broken and scattered after the First Great War."

"And what about this place Abshaur? Have you heard of that?"

Elzabet shook his head. "Not I," he said. "But there are Elders who might know of such a place. May I travel with you on your quest?"

Gareth wasn't so sure, but the girls were agreed. "Okay, Elzabet. But no funny tricks."

"On my honour, kind sir," the elf replied and scurried away under the bridge to return with his bow, a quiver full of arrows and his provisions in a small pack on the end of a stick.

So, where next, I wonder?" asked Bethany as she carefully opened the oiled-leather packet Gareth had retrieved.

There was another scrap of parchment inside and she handed it to Ellie, who read it out loud:

*The king has built a scaffold
Outside the city gate
Answer the question truthfully
Or hanging will be your fate.
I start with a whistle
And sound like a bell
Let yourself down
Then break my spell.*

"Well, he's certainly a cheery old soul, whoever composed these clues!" Gareth laughed nervously.

Elzabet was almost hopping up and down on the spot with excitement. "Please to follow me. I am knowing where next you must go!"

Hmm, thought Ellie. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea taking the little fellow along with them, after all. And – who knows? –

that bow and arrow of his might come in useful, too.

They seemed to walking along that dusty road for hours and getting nowhere.

“Are you sure you know where we're going, Elzabet?” Gareth asked every now and then, and there was a hint of suspicion in the tone of his voice.

“Master Gareth,” the elf replied patiently. “Please to be trusting me.”

“How far is it?” asked Bethany.

“Twice as long as half of it.” Ellie replied impishly.

Elzabet looked up into the sky. It was already late afternoon. “We could be reaching the city shortly after sunset, Mistress Bethany, but the gates would by then for the night be closed. Therefore, I am thinking we should be making camp soon and waiting until first thing in the morning before our journey completing.”

“You know the terrain, Elzabet,” Ellie said: “I'll leave that decision up to you.”

Before long – and again not a moment too soon for Gareth – they turned a corner in the road and Elzabet led them over a stile in the dry-stone walling lining the route and into a grassy field.

Ahead of them was a stone circle like the one she'd once come across in the woods not far from the cottage, but this one was not nearly so well preserved and many of the heavily-weathered stones had toppled over with the ravages of time.

“What is this place?” Ellie wanted to know.

“If my memory is serving me correctly, Mistress Ellie, this is Merlin's Ring,” the sylvan elf told them.

The elf led them to the centre of the circle and they flopped down. They were all quite exhausted after the long walk and Gareth had his socks off and was nursing a blister on one of his reddened heels. Fortunately, though the grass was quite short and uninviting, the ground beneath them was surprisingly springy.

Meanwhile, Elzabet had dropped his bow and arrows and his pack and he was skipping off into the trees, apparently none the worse for wear. He returned shortly afterwards, bowed down under the weight of an armful of dead wood, then just as quickly he was off again.

When he'd finished, Elzabet busied himself building-up the

sticks in a pyramid and arranged a number of small rocks around the edge to hold the fire in. Gareth watched intently as he sat down cross-legged, took out a short knife and carved out a small cup-shaped hole out of the piece of wood. He took a little leather pouch out of his sack and sprinkled a small quantity of some fine substance into the bottom of the hole.

“Tinder,” he explained, noting Gareth's interest.

Placing a big ball of dry bracken in front of him, Elzabet took a long thin stick from his quiver, picked up his bow and twisted the stick so that the bowstring was looped around the stick. Then, with one end of the thin stick in the hole he'd made and the other end of the stick in his left hand, he pulled the bow this way and that to make the thin stick spin around and around. Within seconds, the friction had caused the end of the stick to glow and, blowing gently in the hole, Elzabet managed to get the tinder to catch.

He tossed a little more tinder in the hole, then tipped the glowing contents onto the dry bracken. With a little more blowing the bracken suddenly sprang to life and flared up. Elzabet took the ball of bracken in his hand, thrust it into the heart of the pyramid of sticks and continued to blow on the fire until the whole thing had caught and flames were crackling and licking this way and that between the sticks.

“*Et voila!*” Bethany called enthusiastically.

“Aye,” said Elzabet. “Not bad if I does say so myself.”

Then he got to his feet again. “Well, I'd best some more wood be getting,” he said. “I am thinking we'll be glad of the fire before this night is out.”

Gareth got up to help him.

“Thank you, Master Gareth,” said Elzabet. “But I am thinking it would be better for you to stay here by the fire – it's already coming in dark.” The elf looked all around him and his long, pointy ears were twitching as if he were straining to hear what was going on around them.

Elzabet seemed quite agitated when he finally returned. “Begging your pardons for taking so long,” he apologized, laying down his big bundle, “but I was having to go deep into the trees to collect this wood.”

In the distance, they could hear a wolf howling and a little

closer-to, to the west where the sun had now set, they heard another call in return.

Elzabet said nothing but threw another couple of sticks on the fire.

“Tell us about Lord Develin, Elzabet,” said Ellie. She was anxious to find out as much as possible about the man and the schemes he had for the land – and how this might tie-in with the quest they'd unwittingly embarked upon.

Elzabet declined. “It does not do to talk about such things in the twilight hours, when the dread Lord's spies and minions abroad might be.”

Almost as if it came in direct answer, a loud howling started up. It was over to Ellie's left, not far outside the stone circle.

Elzabet fingered his bow nervously and his ears were twitching again, something that didn't escape Ellie's notice.

Across the way, beyond the tree-line, there were more wolves howling in response, as if they were being summoned to a nocturnal meeting.

“We must be ready,” Elzabet whispered, and he leant forward to thrust the ends of half a dozen heavy sticks into the fire.

“Ready for what?” asked Gareth, apparently oblivious to the developments.

“Wolves,” replied Ellie, stating what to her and Elzabet at least, was the obvious.

“Don't be daft,” Gareth chirped up. “Wolves are a much misunderstood and maligned species. Why, I bet they're more scared of us than we need be of them.”

Elzabet shook his head vigorously. “I am begging to differ, Master Gareth, sir. By the sound of those wolves they are hungry for blood and on business intent.”

There was another blood-curdling howl to Ellie's right now. She turned her head abruptly and caught sight of a pair of orange eyes shining brightly in the light of the camp-fire. And she saw a dark shadow briefly slinking across the grass between the megaliths.

Elzabet was on his feet now. He whipped an arrow from his quiver, kissed the metal tip, fitted it to his bow and slowly began to turn round on the spot, anxiously peering into the darkness between the stones.

Ellie reached over into the fire and pulled out one of the glowing sticks. Bethany and Gareth followed suit.

Ellie's heart leapt – one of the wolves had broken into the stone circle. She was suddenly swamped in a wave of adrenalin, and for a moment she thought she might collapse on the spot.

Elzabet swung round and let fly with an arrow. It caught the animal in its rear. The wolf yelped and it slunk away whimpering, dragging its hind leg behind it.

He snatched up another arrow, but before he could draw the bow there were wolves everywhere and he was knocked to the ground and mauled.

Bethany rushed over to Elzabet. The animal let go of his arm, bared its teeth and got ready to pounce on the girl.

She darted forward and thrust the burning stick in its sensitive muzzle just as the animal leapt on her. The stick went flying and she was bowled over by its huge bulk, taking her breath away. Then, shaking its head this way and that, the animal scurried away into the darkness.

Elzabet was on his feet again now. He let fly with another shot and a third wolf hit the dust with an arrow straight through its throat and half way out the other side. It stood there for a moment, then slumped to the ground and lay there quivering in the throes of death.

There were two wolves facing Gareth now. He was fending them off with a burning stick, but they kept lunging forward, probing his defences. Meanwhile, a third wolf was creeping round the side of him to attack him from the rear.

Ellie and Bethany charged at the wolves as one, screaming out loud and brandishing the fiery sticks before them as they ran. Startled by this sudden move, the remaining wolves scattered and disappeared into the night.

“Are you alright, Elzabet?” asked Bethany as they sat down to get their breath back. There was a large gash in his arm and the blood was running freely from it.

“Yes thank you, I can be managing,” he said and he reached into his sack and brought out a bundle of leaves and a length of bandage. He attempted to press the leaves to the wound and wind the bandage around his arm, but he was struggling.

“Here, allow me,” Bethany requested, and while Elzabet held

the leaves, she wrapped the bandage round and, in lieu of a safety pin, tied the end in a loose knot.

“You were right about the wolves, Elzabet, and I was wrong,” Gareth admitted quite openly and sincerely. “Do you think they’ll come back?”

“I am not knowing this thing,” Elzabet said. “But tonight we must be keeping the fire burning and I will be on watch staying.”

“We could take it in turns,” Ellie suggested. “Wake me up in a couple of hours.”

Elzabet protested, but Ellie's mind was made up and finally he backed down. “Very well, Mistress Ellie, whatever I say, you will be having it your way,” he said finally. “Now please to be getting your beauty sleep. It will be light soon enough.”

She only seemed to have been asleep for a few minutes when the elf roused her. But her two hours on watch were the longest two hours she could ever remember. Finally, after a rather boring and uneventful spell on guard, she woke Gareth and slipped back off to sleep again. And again, it seemed that she'd no sooner closed her eyes than it was daylight and she was being woken up again. It turned out that Gareth had dozed off while on guard and the fire had all but gone out, but fortunately the wolves had not ventured back.

By the time they were fully awake, Elzabet had been busy. He'd managed to get a kettle of water boiling and was making an infusion of some herbs he'd gathered in the woods. “There you are,” he said, passing a large tin cup over to Ellie. “There is only one mug so we will have to be taking turns.”

“Mmm. That's delicious, Elzabet. Thank you,” said Ellie, draining the cup.

“I wish we had some food, though,” Gareth complained. “I'm starving.”

If he was hoping to conjure food up from thin air that day, however, he was sadly mistaken. The food was not forthcoming.

“Suit yourself, then!” he huffed.

“When we have entered the city, we can be getting something to eat,” Elzabet consoled him. He'd got his sack packed and over his shoulder on the end of a pole and he was apparently eager to be off.

“Okay, crew, let's hit the road again,” requested Bethany,

taking Gareth's arm and helping him to his feet.

"Slave-driver," Gareth hissed. "You're just as bad as Mr Goodman." He was the boys' grumpy old house master.

"Please not to be being a Moaning Minnie, Master Gareth. It is not far now and lots of scrum-diddly-umptious food awaits your stomach."



"There, didn't I tell you?" beamed Elzabet at last. Ahead of them, nestling in a horseshoe shaped bend in the river, stood the city. Ellie had lost count of the number of times that the wily old elf had insisted that it lay "just around the next corner."

"That is Beth-Galen," Elzabet proudly announced.

The four of them skipped down the road and at last they arrived at a tall, stout gateway leading into a large walled city.

At the gateway, however, the king had had a gallows erected and people wishing to enter the city were queuing up to be questioned by the captain of the guard.

"What's going on?" Ellie asked and Elzabet wandered off into the crowd to find out.

When he returned, the elf told them: "Everyone is to be questioned before entering the city," he said. "If they are answering truthfully, they are to be let in, if they are telling a lie, they are to be hanged."

Ellie fished out the last piece of parchment and read it through again:

The king has built a scaffold

Outside the city gate

Answer the question truthfully

Or hanging will be your fate.

The bodies were already stacked high on a wagon standing close-by and the heap was growing by the minute. Their prospects of making it through the gates didn't look at all good.

Ellie stood there trembling with fear for some time – then out of the blue she suddenly remembered the story she'd once read in the book *The Dreamwalkers*. And again she was faced by the question – had she dreamed this test up because she'd read about it in the book? Or had she been destined to read it because at some point in time she would be facing just such a challenge?

Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heartbeat, she pushed

forward through the crowd. "Come with me," she told the others. "And do exactly as I do – remember that – do exactly as I do!"

"Hey, where you going, witch?" the captain demanded.

"I am going to be hanged," Ellie called in a loud voice.

"Oh, my God – Ellie! Are you out of your mind?" Gareth spluttered. "Get away from here while you still have a chance."

Ellie was unmoved. Bethany caught his arm and restrained him as he turned to walk away. "Steady, Gareth!" Bethany hissed. "Don't mess this up!"

"I don't believe you!" the captain bellowed in her ear, making her flinch.

"Very well," she said, plucking up the courage. "If I have told a lie, then hang me."

"But ..." the captain spluttered: "but ... but ... that would make it the truth ..."

"Exactly," Ellie replied as she headed on toward the gate: "Your truth."

The others hurried after her, anxious to be away before the captain of the guard recovered from his temporary confusion.

"Eh?! You can't let her do that!" the crowd bellowed.

"Pushing in like that, ruddy little harlot! No blooming manners at all!"

"Come back here you and join the back of the queue!"

"Phew!" gasped Gareth as soon as they were safely away from the scaffold. "Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again!" He seemed oblivious to the fact that she'd probably saved his life that day.

6. Beth-Galen

Ellie took another look at the verse:

*The king has built a scaffold
Outside the city gate
Answer the question truthfully
Or hanging will be your fate.*

Okay, so they'd safely made it through that bit.

“What about this, then, chaps?” she asked them and read the verse out:

*I start with a whistle
And sound like a bell
Let yourself down
Then break my spell.*

“We'll see,” said Gareth. “First of all, though, I think we should go and find something to eat. Lead the way, Elzabet.”

They walked through the heavy wooden gates, under the raised portcullis and past the fortified gatehouse. A guard eyed them closely as they passed. Indeed, everybody seemed to be giving them funny looks. Not because of the sylvan elf, though. Most likely it was because of their strange clothing, Ellie suddenly realized, feeling rather out of place. Most of the men wore breeches, shirts with leather waistcoats and three cornered hats – what were they called? – ah, yes – tricornes.

Over to their left was a stable block, full of horses, the ripe stench of horse manure and swarms of irritating flies.

To their right was a blacksmith's workshop. She could see a heavily-muscled man standing in the doorway. He had a piece of red-hot iron on an anvil and he was bashing it into shape with a heavy hammer. Clunk, clunk, clunk, his hammer went. Then, grasping the hind leg of a horse that was tethered close-by, he raised its leg and checked the horseshoe against its hoof. Apparently satisfied, he burnt the horseshoe into the horse's hoof to make sure it would be correctly seated, then he let go of the creature and doused the shoe in a trough of water.

Ahead of them lay a wide cobbled street lined by terraced buildings and just about every kind of business imaginable. On

one side there was a smelly fish shop, perhaps located a little too close to the fly-infested stables for her liking; a butcher with all manner of fully-feathered poultry and rabbits hung up on hooks over the window. On the other, there was a hardware store; a sword smith's with some awesome weapons on sale; a haberdashery and a women's outfitter. Oh, if only they had a bit of money on them she could have had an absolute field day shopping in the town.

"Come on, Ellie!" Gareth grumbled. She trotted after them as Elzabet took a turning off the high street down a ginnel, a narrow covered alley between the shops.

They came to a doorway and, pausing outside while Ellie caught up, Elzabet opened the door and ushered them inside. "Welcome to the Three Swans," he announced.

"But we haven't got any money, Elzabet," Ellie whispered as he found them a seat at a heavy oak table overlooking the street. The air was thick of tobacco smoke, making Ellie's eyes run, and it was hot and sweaty in there, so the light breeze through the open window was more than welcome.

"That is no problem being," the sylvan elf called back and, fishing in a tiny purse attached to his belt, he produced a silver coin and plonked it down on the table.

"Yes, my loves – what will it be?" enquired a large, buxom woman in a long dress and apron, coming over to the table to serve them.

"A tankard of ale for me, dear lady," said Elzabet, "and lemonade for the young ones."

"And would you like anything to eat?" she asked, just as Gareth was beginning to look worried.

"What is it you are having?" he asked the woman. She didn't seem quite sure what he meant by that at first as his grammar was slightly awry.

"He means what's on the menu?" Bethany explained.

"Oh, I see. Well, there's not a menu as such, little one."

She turned to Elzabet: "There's just vegetable soup, my love, and there's beef stew and dumplings." She said it slowly and clearly to make sure that he understood.

"Then we will be the dumplings and stew having," Elzabet decided.

“Right you are, my love. I'll just be a minute or two.” She took the silver coin and produced a couple of small copper coins in change from a pocket in her apron.

You could tell by Gareth's face that stew and dumplings wasn't exactly his favourite meal, but they were all so hungry that the meal went down a treat. And there was certainly plenty of it. As for the lemonade, it was really rather nice but not what she'd expected. It was still, not sparkling: made the old-fashioned way with lemon juice, water and sugar.

The four of them spent the remainder of the morning wandering around the town. They walked the rest of the way up the high street, past yet more butchers, bakers and even candlestick makers; past one inn after another; a theatre in the round, and Bethany's favourite – a seedy old shop packed to the gunwales with books on every subject imaginable. Money or not, she and Ellie simply had to go in to have a look while Elzabet and Gareth stood outside fidgeting as men do when women are out shopping.

“You know,” Bethany said when they finally emerged. “I could live here quite merrily. There's just no comparison between this and the SunnyDene Home for Wayward Children.”

“What is this place SunnyDene?” asked Elzabet. “Is it far from here?”

So they did their best to explain the Home to him.

“Hmm,” he said at last. “I am thinking that there is indeed to be made a comparison between this Ms Arkwright and the dread Lord himself!”

Indeed there was.

When they came to the city square, they found the place heaving with activity. There was a well in the centre of the square and a long queue of people watched the spectacles as they waited to fill the buckets and pitchers they had with them. There were all manner of market stalls around the edges of the square and quite a few people out performing. Ellie wished she had the self-confidence that they displayed. A skinny youth was filling his mouth with oil and breathing out great balls of fire; two other youths with him were performing acrobatics; there were musicians playing, and a fat man had a great grizzly-looking bear up on its back legs as if dancing along to the music. The whole

place was so vibrant, so cosmopolitan, and so very much alive.

Having had their fill of the entertainment, the four of them climbed the stone steps leading up to the battlements and walked around the city walls. The view – both inside and out – was positively breathtaking.

And finally, having walked all the way around, they sat down for a rest at a place overlooking the square.

Ellie pulled the leather-bound book from her pocket and searched through until she found the last scrap of parchment.

I start with a whistle

And sound like a bell

Let yourself down

Then break my spell.

“Any ideas, chaps?” asked Bethany. “Playtime's over – down to business.”

“‘I start with a whistle’,” Gareth pondered. Then he had an idea: “It could mean the letter 'W'. That's what whistle starts with, anyhow.”

“That's a possibility,” Ellie nodded.

“‘And sound like a bell’. What about that, then? What sounds like a bell?” asked Bethany.

“A buzzer? An alarm? A gong?”

“Dong!” Bethany called out.

“What do you mean, ‘Dong!’?” frowned Gareth.

“I mean, ‘Dong!’ it's just rung a bell with me and I should have figured it out sooner,” she said. “What begins with ‘W’ and sounds like a bell?”

“I give in,” said Gareth: “What does begin with a ‘W’ and sound like a bell?”

“Why a well, of course!” she laughed.

“Okay,” he said: “I’ll buy that. But what about the well?”

“‘Let yourself down’,” Ellie continued.

“On a rope, right?” added Bethany.

“Sounds about right,” Ellie nodded.

“‘And break my spell?’” Can't figure that bit out, though,” Bethany decided. “But I guess we'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Their attention now turned back to the well in the centre of the city square as the most likely candidate for their next mission.

There was only one snag – there was still a lengthy queue of people waiting there to fill their containers.

“Let us until nightfall be waiting,” Elzabet advised.

“You're sure we'll be able to get to the well then? There won't still be people filling their buckets?”

“Quite sure,” Elzabet said. “You are seeing, at dusk there is a curfew, so there won't be people on the streets.”

“Oh great!” said Gareth. “Apart from the guards patrolling the streets, presumably?”

“Quite so,” nodded Elzabet. “And now, perhaps – we might be having another lemonade?”

“Hang on a minute – if we go down the well in the dark, how are we going to see?” Bethany wanted to know.

Whoops! thought Ellie. That was a detail that they all failed to pick up on.

“Most esteemed Mistress Bethany!” Elzabet beamed, clapping her on the shoulder. “You have just been saving us much embarrassment! Yes, indeed – we must be hurrying to the hardware shop for a lantern before the shops are shutting.”

“And how are we going to light the thing?” Gareth chipped in.

Ellie had visions of Elzabet sitting by the side of the well rubbing sticks together with his bow.

“That is smart thinking, Master Gareth. We must be also buying some Lucifers I am thinking.”

“Come again?” enquired Ellie.

“It's an archaic term for a box of matches,” Bethany explained.

“Ah.”

Their second visit to the Three Swans was not quite as frivolous as might have been thought. Listening to the conversations the regulars were having was quite an education.

“They say Lord Develin's army has already taken Dun-Hallow, Kowan,” said one.

“Aye, been terrible casualties, Blod,” said another.

That was the garrison town in Azakstan over the hills to the south that Elzabet had mentioned, Ellie thought – if her memory served her correctly.

Elzabet must have read her mind, for he nodded without

saying anything. And she also remembered the advice he'd given: that Develin's spies and minions might be abroad. What – even here?

Again, she was almost certain she saw the sylvan elf nod to her. There was far more to Elzabet than met the casual eye.

“They say the King's called for a meeting of the Council of the Free Lands, Kowan. It's to be held right here in Beth-Galen. They're hoping to rally the Great Elves to the cause and the Dwarves.”

“Look at what they're facing, though, Blod: the whole of the blooming goblin legions and the skagrats. I don't fancy their chances.”

“Me neither. Still, if the worst is coming there's nothing folk like you and I can do about it. Leave that to The Powers That Be, that's what I say. We might just as well live life to the full while we've still got a chance. You only live once, you know.”

“I do know, Blod,” the man laughed. “And on that pleasant note – fancy another?”

“Why, I don't mind if I do, Kowan. I don't mind if I do!”

Things sounded rather grim for the Free Lands, Ellie pondered.

“Indeed they are,” nodded Elzabet. He didn't actually say it out loud, but she heard the words in her head, all the same.

“Heard the latest, Nobby?” someone asked rhetorically at the next table to theirs.

“Heard what, Finch?”

“Seems the King's daughter – what's her name? – Flavia – has taken to her sick bed. They've tried all the doctors in the city, but no-one can find a cure for her.”

“Really?”

“Aye, Nobby – the king's so desperate that he's offered a reward of a hundred gold pieces to anyone who can make her well again.”

“Hmm. Tried leeches have they, Finch?”

“I should expect so.”

“You know, Finch, I might just have a bash at that myself,” the man said: “My old dear's got a wonderful remedy for all sorts of ailments. Made out of molasses and snake oil and stale urine – all sorts of stuff. Secret recipe, mind – been in the family for

generations.”

“Well, I should be careful if I were you, Nobby. You see the king's got a wicked temper these days – what with the princess being ill and all that – and he's just as likely to have your head taken off as look at you, they say.”

“Hah! People would do, though, wouldn't they – spreading rumours like that. It's probably a ploy to deter people so they stand a better chance of getting hold of the gold themselves! Stands to reason, doesn't it?”

7. Down the well

They left the Three Swans close on sunset and headed up the high-street towards the city square.

Elzabet had obviously been doing some thinking while they'd been at the inn and he was quick to point out the occasional sentries who walked the walls – including a section and a guard tower which overlooked the square. And they could expect others to be patrolling up and down the high-street, most likely turning as they came to the square.

Ellie's heart sank as she looked out across that vast expanse of open space. The only cover offered to them were the street stalls around the edges, their goods and chattels removed but the canvas canopies still in place; a raised curtained stage used by some of the street performers, and the walls of the well itself.

The way ahead was clear. Just before the bell rang out from a tower in the palace, signalling the beginning of the curfew, they skirted the edge of the square and concealed themselves beneath one of the stalls.

Shortly afterwards, the bell began to peel and several armed soldiers marched out of the guardhouse near the palace, down the road to the north side of the square, crossed the square past the well and went off down the high-street to the south.

All this time, Elzabet was looking around him and in particular he was watching a sentry on the battlements who kept pacing back and forth between the guard tower where he was based and the ones to either side. Every now and again he stopped and appeared to be looking out through the crenelations.

For about a third of his tour, he could overlook the square at will. Most likely he'd be more interested in what might be going on outside the city walls – even now they were on the alert for the Dark Forces. But you couldn't bank on that. He might just as easily have a look around the square.

And for two thirds of his tour of duty, though you could just about make out the plume of feathers on top of his helmet and the tip of his lance, he was more or less hidden from them and, conversely and more importantly, them from him.

That was the time to move. And that's when they did move. Keeping as low as they could, they ran – in their stocking feet to avoid kicking up a din – from the cover of the market stall across to the temporary stage.

Elzabet turned his beady eyes back to the guard up on the battlements and checked the head of the high-street. Some of the soldiers had a habit of hanging around there. Such was the case, and they had to wait a full ten minutes whilst a couple of the soldiers finished off a pipe of tobacco, before they dare move on.

They didn't know what to expect when they reached the well and there had been some debate about whether they should all go to the site or just one – and if only one, then which one? In the end, it was decided that they should all go.

And that's the way it was. On Elzabet's signal they ran forward and crouched down beside the well while Gareth sent the bucket down to the bottom of the well on the end of the rope.

In the end they'd decided that Bethany should be the one to go down the rope. Surprisingly she was the fittest of them all and, with the exception of Elzabet, she was the lightest. If she couldn't climb back up the rope herself, then she would be the easiest to wind back up.

“See anything yet?” asked Gareth, peering over the edge.

“I'm not down at the bottom yet,” an eerie, reverberating voice called back up.

They waited anxiously. “Any luck?”

“No, nothing yet.”

Elzabet was looking all around him. “Oh my dear – there is someone across the blooming square coming!” he whispered. “Be staying very still!”

“Hey, guys!” Bethany suddenly called out. “I've found it!”

“Shh!” called Ellie down the well.

“What's going on up there?”

“Someone's coming!” Ellie hissed.

Bethany fell silent and Ellie crawled into the shadow of the well head.

A soldier was marching across the square from the direction of the high-street now – and the way he was heading he was going to pass right by the well. Ellie wondered whether they'd be able to creep round the edge and stay out of sight as he passed.

“That is what I am thinking,” came Elzabet's voice in her head.

Then she had an idea. If she stood up and distracted the soldier's attention, the worst that could happen would be for her to be arrested for breaking the curfew. They'd probably just keep her in the cells overnight, being so young. And that way, the others wouldn't be discovered.

Elzabet grabbed hold of her arm. “No, no, no. You cannot be doing that thing!” he hissed. “Now please be letting me concentrate.”

Concentrate on what? she wondered.

Oh hell-fire! The guard was coming over to the well. She knew in that moment that he was going to the well, most likely to fill his water-bottle.

Elzabet nodded but said nothing. As the soldier approached he tugged her and Gareth around the far side of the well. Fortunately the moon was not particularly full and there was a bit of cloud in the sky, so the square was in darkness.

Elzabet was whispering something under his breath now – strange words that she didn't understand – and his attention was firmly fixed on the approaching soldier. It was almost as if he was willing the man away.

At the very last moment, the soldier abruptly changed direction and marched off in the direction of the palace road. And as he went, so the three of them crept round the other side of the well.

“Okay yet?” hissed Bethany. “I can't hang on here much longer, you know.”

Ellie peered down into the well. “Sure. You say you've found something? You can bring it up now so that we can have a look.”

“No I can't,” Bethany called back. “You see what I've found down here is a secret passage. So instead of me coming up, I was rather thinking you lot might come down.”

Ellie relayed the message to the others. “What do you think, Elzabet?”

“Well, as they are saying – 'In for a scruple, in for a Noble',” he replied.

Didn't he mean in for a penny in for a pound?

“It is to much the same thing amounting,” Elzabet agreed.

“Okay, let's go then.” Ellie swung her legs over the edge of the well and began to slide down the rope. “Coming down, Bethany,” she called.

By the time she was half way down she could hardly see a thing, but then she spotted Bethany's light. She was standing in an archway cut into the side of the well and she reached out to grab Ellie as she came down.

Ellie swung her feet out and heaved herself into the archway. She squeezed past Bethany so that whoever came down next could still see the light.

When Gareth came down, he overshot the mark a little and he had a devil of a job pulling himself back up the well. “I can't hang on!” he yelled.

“Don't try to climb the rope dead-weight,” Bethany ordered him.

“My hands are slipping and I'm losing my grip!”

“Brace you feet against the wall and just walk yourself up! Now come on!”

That worked a treat. Finally they were all safely in the secret tunnel and Bethany breathed a great sigh of relief. Gareth seemed a bit scared by his ordeal, and she too was shaking like a leaf.

“Right Bethany, you'd better lead the way,” said Ellie. “Everybody else, stick close to one-another.”

A little further on, they came across a wider chamber where the passageway branched in three directions.

“Which way now?” Ellie asked.

“Looks like we'll have to try them all,” said Bethany.

Elzabet looked at the others, especially Gareth. “Let us be staying here while we all our breath and our nerve get back.”

He sat down and rummaged in the pack which he'd tied around his belt. Pulling out a flask, he took a swig himself and passed it round.

“Jeez!” cried Ellie as she took a mouthful. The liquid was like fire water and yet it had a wonderful taste like freshly squeezed oranges. “Well, that certainly warms the cockles of your heart!”

A few minutes later, just as Gareth was about to nod off, by the look of him, Elzabet called them to order. “I am thinking it is time we moved on,” he said.

They got wearily to their feet.

“Which way?” asked Gareth.

It didn't really matter which way they tried first. “Let's try the middle way,” Ellie decided quite arbitrarily.

“The middle way it is,” said Bethany, leading the way with the storm lantern held before her.

They seemed to be walking for an age but still the tunnel went on, as straight as a die. And then the tunnel ended abruptly at a short flight of steps. Bethany went ahead up the steps and stopped at a blank wall and spent some time probing the wall and examining it carefully in the light of the lantern. It looked like a dead-end. And yet the tunnel couldn't simply end there, though. That would be pointless – indeed it would be ludicrous. There must be some hidden mechanism, surely?

“May I?” Ellie asked and Bethany passed the lantern over and let her through. She was just squeezing past Bethany when her shoulder caught on something projecting from the side wall. It was a lever of some kind.

Ellie took hold of the lever. As she pulled the lever down, she heard a catch release. Putting her shoulder to the blank wall she pushed hard – and, lo! and behold! the whole panel swung out and she saw light shining through from the other side.

Handing the storm lantern back to Bethany, she stepped through the opening. The doorway was concealed behind a portrait with quite a drop down the other side, and she stumbled on the way out. The others followed after her, careful not to make the same mistake she had.

When they emerged they found themselves standing in a long, wide marble corridor. There were a number of large double doors leading off the passage on either side, made of fine polished wood. And on the walls between the doors were grandiose portraits of what looked like royalty and nobility. The place was unbelievably palatial.

Elizabet's ears pricked up and he nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Once before I have been here. This is indeed King Dorian's palace.”

The doorway closed silently behind them, so well concealed behind the portrait that you wouldn't have known it was there. Ellie made a mental note of which picture it was in case they had

to beat a hasty retreat.

Just then, one of the doors opened and a figure emerged into the corridor. Ellie froze on the spot.

“What are you doing here?” the figure demanded, drawing a sword and coming towards them. “Graystone!”

A second figure emerged and looked up and down the corridor. Catching sight of them, he too drew his sword and came running toward them.

“What are you doing there?” the first figure demanded, brandishing his sword menacingly.

Ellie thought fast. “We’ve come about the princess,” she blurted out. It was all she could think of in that brief space of time. “One of the sentries gave us directions – but we appear to have um ... lost our way.”

Elzabet was standing just over her shoulder and she could hear him muttering more strange incantations and fixing the man with his beady eyes. “We pose no threat, Sire,” he said in a dull monotone, hardly audible to the ear.

“Ah,” said the man, his tone suddenly becoming more amenable. Seeing that they appeared to pose no immediate threat to him, he sheathed his sword. Whatever Elzabet had done, it seemed to have worked. Then: “But what are you doing here so late? Don’t you know there’s a curfew?”

Ellie played dumb. “A curfew, you say? No, I’m sorry – we didn’t know. As soon as we heard that Princess um ...”

“Flavia”, Elzabet prompted under his breath.

“That’s right – Princess Flavia. As soon as we heard that the princess was ill we rushed straight here to see what we could do to um ... affect a cure. I understand that the king is most anxious to find a remedy.”

“Time is being of the very essence,” Elzabet added.

“We were told that there’s not a moment to lose,” Bethany chipped in.

The man looked at them suspiciously, but just as he was about to ask another awkward question, a third person emerged from the room down the corridor.

“Olson, what the devil are you doing there?” the man boomed.

Olson and Graystone swung round and bowed. “Um ... these

people are here to attend to Princess Flavia, your High and Mightiness.”

So that must be King Dorian.

“Indeed. Well I hope this isn't going to be another hopeless fiasco! What have you come up with this time? Not more leeches or snake oil, I trust!”

“Oh no, sir,” Ellie fibbed, aware that she was digging herself deeper and deeper into what might turn out to be her own grave, if the rumours of the King's evil temper were after all true. “We have something far more um ... efficacious than that.”

“Well, best show them to the room. It's getting late in the day, so don't be long about it! The princess may be ill but she still needs her sleep.” And with that, the king turned on his heel and walked away down the corridor.

Olson still seemed a little perturbed by what had happened, as if he knew he'd somehow been hood-winked but couldn't quite figure out how and was powerless to do anything about it. He shook his head and frowned, but at last he said: “If you'll follow me, I shall hescort you to the princess's sick-bed.” And follow him they dutifully did.

He led them upstairs, along a vast corridor that was every bit as impressive as the first one. Heaven only knows how long it had taken to build this colossal palace or how many thousand labourers and skilled craftsmen were employed.

8. Princess Flavia

At last they came to a set of double doors and Olson gently tapped on the wood. A lady-in-waiting opened the door and stepped outside. She looked rather surprised to see them there. "Oh," she said, looking down her nose at them. "I thought I'd made it quite clear that we were finished here today? The princess Flavia needs her beauty sleep."

Olson seemed a little intimidated by the woman.

Elzabet fixed her with his eyes and said: "Lady, we has rushed here from a great distance at great peril to our own lives to cure Princess Flavia. And King Dorian himself has been ordering us to attend to her this very evening."

"Is that right, Olson?"

Olson didn't seem quite sure of anything at the moment. "Yes, m'lady, that his correct."

"Time is being of the very essence," Elzabet explained.

"We were told that there's not a moment to lose," Bethany chipped in.

"The princess's life may very well depend upon it," Ellie added. If the truth be known, if this didn't work, then all their lives might depend upon it.

"Ah, well, um ... in that case you'd better come in. But don't be long, mind – the princess appears even weaker and more unresponsive than ever today."

They filed into the bedroom. A magnificent old oak four poster bed dominated the room and she could see the princess laying in the bed with her eyes closed. Over by the large heavily-curtained windows was a highly-polished ornate dressing table and mirror; and along the back wall was a row of seats which made the bedroom look more like a doctor's waiting room.

"Are you all together or separate?" the lady-in-waiting asked, motioning toward the seats. Bethany, Gareth and Elzabet said nothing but made a bee-line for the seats, leaving Ellie standing and feeling rather uncomfortable in the centre of the room. Apparently, having opened her big mouth, they had now volunteered her to be the first to put her foot in it.

“Thanks a lot, guys,” she said under her breath.

“You are welcome, Mistress Ellie,” came back Elzabet's silent reply.

Ellie took another look around the room. She walked over to the bedside and had a look at the princess. Her face looked rather pale.

“Hello, Princess Flavia,” she said: “I'm Ellie.”

There was absolutely no response from the girl.

“Well?” the lady-in-waiting wanted to know. She was hovering around the bed with growing impatience. “What do you think?”

“We'll see. This is a most difficult case,” said Ellie. She went across the room to fetch a chair and take it to the princess's bedside. And she made a point of going round the room lighting the remaining candles: the room was far too dark, morbid and formal for her liking.

Ellie seated herself close by the princess and leant over to feel her forehead. It was quite cool, perhaps a little too cool. “Well, there's no fever,” she told the lady-in-waiting.

She opened one of the girl's eyes. The pupil reacted to the light as she waved one of the candles in front of her eyes. And so did the other one. Well, that was one thing at least. It was almost as the girl was under some kind of spell.

And then she remembered the verse:

I start with a whistle

And sound like a bell

Let yourself down

Then break my spell.

In that instant, Ellie knew that they were supposed to be here and what they were supposed to do.

“Well?”

“You'll be relieved to know that the princess is neither dead nor in a coma,” she explained.

She took her pocket watch in one hand and grasped the princess's wrist in the other, found a pulse and waited until the second hand on the watch reached the top before timing her pulse. It was very weak and quite slow, but there was a pulse none-the-less.

Ellie squeezed the princess's hand reassuringly. She might,

after all, be able to hear and feel what was going on around her even if she did make no response. "It's alright, Flavia, I'm just checking you over."

"There have been countless doctors and quacks and leeches and healers in here," the lady-in-waiting retorted. "They've been through all this rigmarole. And not one of them has been able to find anything physically wrong with the princess."

"M'lady, if you can't think of anything positive to say, then I'd rather you didn't say anything at all!" Ellie retorted. "If you're not part of the solution, then you're part of the problem!"

As she said this, Ellie suddenly noticed that the princess's pulse was beating a little stronger, then it gradually returned to its normal, weak state. She turned back to the princess, still holding her hand for comfort. "So you are aware of what's going on around you!" she smiled. "Well, that's a start, at least."

The lady-in-waiting was adamant. "There's nothing wrong with the princess's head, nor her heart, nor her stomach ..."

Again the princess's pulse seemed to skip a beat as the lady-in-waiting was talking.

Then she had an idea. Maybe the princess knew what was wrong with her, deep down?

"Is it your head, princess? You can tell me."

The princess made no response and her pulse remained steady.

"Is it your stomach?"

There was no response.

"What about your heart, then?"

Instantly, Ellie felt the princess's pulse speed up for a few moments, then gradually the beating subsided.

"It's her heart," Ellie said.

"How many times do you need telling, girl? The doctors have found nothing physically wrong with her!"

"Well there must be something wrong with her. Why else should she be laying here in her sick-bed? This place is so morbid! Why isn't she out having fun?"

The woman had no answer prepared for that one and she just stood there huffing and puffing.

"What kind of life does she have here? Doesn't she have any friends to play with? Don't suitors ever call?"

The princess's pulse began to race and her eyelids flickered momentarily.

Bingo!

“It is your heart, isn't it?”

Yes, came the reply.

And then it hit her. “You're in love, aren't you?!”

There was a definite response. The lady-in-waiting appeared to go into a state of shock and she went over to the chairs and sat down.

“Who is it? Is it someone far away?”

Apparently not.

“Do they live in the city?”

It would seem so.

“Where in the city? In the palace?”

No.

“In the garrison?”

No.

“What about ... what about the town? Am I getting warmer or colder?”

There was a slight response.

“OK, now let me think. Does this person work in the town?”

Again, there was a slight response.

“In the stables?” She tried to picture the walk they'd had up the high-street.

“Is he a blacksmith?”

“A fishmonger?”

The lady-in-waiting could control herself no longer. “Oh, really – this is ridiculous. A fishmonger indeed! This is the princess Flavia we are talking about here, not some common trollop! Olson, get these people out of here this instant!”

But Olson was becoming interested. “No,” he retorted. “She may be onto something. Let the girl be.”

“Okay, what about a butcher?”

“A baker?”

“A candlestick maker?”

“A costermonger?”

“What's that?” asked Gareth.

“It's someone who sells fruit or other wares from a barrow.”

“Ah.”

“Does he have a market stall?”

“Is he a performer? Like a juggler or a musician or a fire-eater?”

No, no, no – for everything she thought of, the answer was no.

Ellie racked her brains. “A bookseller, maybe?”

Again the princess's pulse began to race. It was beating faster than ever now.

“Well done, Flavia!” Ellie beamed and she got up from her chair and leant over to kiss the princess on her cheek. Then she turned to the lady-in-waiting and Olson and said to them: “It's an affair of the heart. The princess is in love with a bookseller.”

“Keetch,” the Princess murmured.

“The heart does not lie,” Elzabet pointed out.

“Well, I never did!” was all the lady-in-waiting could say, but Olson was already out of the room.

“Guard!” he commanded. “Go to the high-street and bring the bookseller Keetch here. Bring him up to the princess's bedroom. Hurry, man – at the double!” And he scuttled off down the corridor himself to get the king and queen.

Within the hour, they were all assembled and anxiously waiting in the room by the princess's bedside: Ellie, Bethany, Gareth and Elzabet; King Dorian and Queen Gertie; the lady-in-waiting; Olson and Graystone. At last, the guard came running up the corridor, dragging the bookseller behind him.

“Here's the bookseller, Sire,” the guard announced with a deep bow, and he thrust the man into the room. “Goes by the name of Keetch.”

As soon as the princess heard that name her eyes flickered and opened. “Keetch!” she called. All heads turned toward the princess.

Why, that's the first word that Flavia has spoken for months!” the queen gasped.

The bookseller sidled over toward the bedside to get a better look. The guard was going to stop him but Olson held the guard back.

“Keetch! Is it really you?”

The princess pushed herself up on her elbows and bleared around. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Keetch!” she gasped

as she saw the man hovering by her bedside, and she sat up in bed and held her arms out. There were tears rolling down her face now.

The bookseller edged nervously closer.

“Oh, do come here, Keetch.”

Overcoming his anxieties at being in such noble company, the man went to sit on the bed and embraced the princess. “Oh,” he wailed. “I’ve waited so long. I didn’t think that a princess could fall in love with a common bookseller like me ...”

“It’s true, Keetch, so please believe it,” the princess told him, wiping away his tears. “I do love you!”

“Well, I never did!” the lady-in-waiting huffed.

“You may go, Dora,” requested the queen, wiping away a tear of her own, and the lady-in-waiting hoisted the hem of her dress up and marched from the room.

“Well,” said the king at last. “Let’s leave those two lovers to a little privacy.” He shepherded them all from the room. Then he turned to Ellie, Bethany, Gareth and Elzabet. “You know, when I first saw you, I would never have guessed that you’d be able to cure my daughter. You have done magnificently, my friends, and I will be eternally grateful to you. Come, let’s adjourn to my quarters for a celebratory drink. And I don’t suppose a spot of food would go amiss, eh?”

Gareth’s eyes lit up. “Lead the way, your Majesty.”



“You’re strangers to these parts, aren’t you?” the king asked, stuffing a roast potato in his mouth. It was more of a statement than a question. “So what brings you to these parts?”

Ellie decided that honesty was the best policy. She told the assembled guests the whole story.

“We come from a faraway realm called Sher Point,” she said. It would have complicated matters too much to have begun speaking of Zone Five or DreamScape. “In our travels we came across a wonderful, lush, wooded valley ...”

“Elvenglade,” Gareth chipped-in.

“Well, that’s what we called the place, but we don’t know its real name.

“Anyhow, we came across a little stone cottage and while we were staying there I found a book in the library. It was a very

strange book entitled *The Treasure Hunt*.”

“What's so strange about that?” asked the queen.

“Well, you see, all the pages in the book were blank,” Ellie explained, and she pulled the book out of her pocket to show them.

“Curious,” remarked the king. Then: “What are these little scraps of parchment?”

“Ah, now that's the interesting bit, and therein lies a remarkable tale,” Ellie said, taking the book back. “You see, when we searched the pages of the book, we found one of these pieces of parchment tucked inside. It had a verse on it, in handwritten ink.”

“And what did it say?” asked Olson, growing more interested.

Ellie flipped through the book and found the note, then, clearing her throat, she read out the introduction:

*The realm is in turmoil
Lord Develin seeks power
If you want to save the day
You must leave within the hour.
Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together
And take it to Abshaur.*

“Well, well, well,” said the king. “So possession of the Elvenstone is the key to the trouble with that accursèd Develin, is it?”

“Do you know anything about such a thing?” asked Bethany.

Olson shrugged. “Only that it is reputed that after the First Great War it was split in four and that the pieces were scattered through the land, as the verse implies. As for Abshaur? Whether this is a place or a man, I know not. I take it you haven't found any of the fragments yet?”

“Not yet,” Ellie answered, but that's where the scraps of parchment come in. This is the rest of the verse:

*But before you do this
You must solve this clue
And then you'll surely know
What you must first do.*

*Find something twisted
And turn to the west
Walk straight for a league
“Til you find a place to rest.
I'm old and I'm gnarled
There's a hole inside me
I could hide somebody*

“We followed that clue to an old oak tree. There was a hole in its trunk big enough for a man to hide inside. And in the hole we found a second clue,” and she explained how the trail of clues had led them to the well and to finding a cure for the princess.

The king was astounded. “A secret passageway from the well, you say – I shall have to look into this. And where does the passageway emerge?”

“On the corridor where Olson and Graystone found us,” Gareth told him.

Ellie tried to remember: “Ah yes, behind the portrait of the gentleman wearing a monocle.”

The king thought for a minute. “Oh, you mean great-uncle Humphrey. Wouldn't put it past the beggar if it wasn't him who had the passageway built in the first place. Well, I never!”

The king was getting up from the table now and the others did as he did. Gareth was still seated, looking as if he'd been expecting pudding, but apparently there was none.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” said the king, turning to his noblemen Olson and Graystone and, bowing their way out, they left the dining room.

“So, what are your plans now?” the queen asked, guiding Ellie through a doorway into a lounge and offering her a seat. The others followed them in.

“Well, that's the thing, you see. The clues seem to have led us this far, but no further.”

“Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that,” the king told them. “First of all, there is the matter of the reward for the wonderful services you have rendered.” And, reaching into a large pocket in his robe, he placed a heavy bundle in Ellie's upturned palm.

“Why, thank you,” she beamed, taking a peek at the gleaming coins inside the leather pouch.

“On the contrary, my dear – thank you.”

“And there's one other thing ...” The king went over to a writing bureau, rummaged around inside it and brought over a leather package, bound with red ribbon. “An itinerant holy man brought this to me some time ago, shortly after Flavia fell sick. He told me to give it to whomever managed to cure my daughter of her malady; that on no account was it to be opened before then; and to keep the matter of the package secret, even from my own family and our courtiers. He said that whoever I gave the package to would know what to do with it.”

Ellie undid the ribbon binding the package. Then she carefully opened it on her lap.

“Oh my!” she gasped when she caught sight of the contents. It was a sparkling clear blue gem the size of a hen's egg, though oddly shaped as if it were not in itself complete. And it was wonderfully warm to the touch. Instantly, she knew what it was. “The first fragment of the Elvenstone!” she blurted, and they all gathered round to have a look at it and to hold it in their hands.

“Good Lord! My dear,” advised the king. “You must keep the Elvenstone safe and hidden from prying eyes. It is very precious.”

Ellie went to tuck the gem safely in her pocket when she noticed something else had fallen out of the package. It was another scrap of parchment. She leant down to pick it up. And it came as no great surprise to her to find that written on the parchment was the next clue in their epic treasure hunt.

“Now,” said the king, clasping his hands together. “You must be tired after your recent escapades. Gertie,” (that was the queen), “perhaps you'd be good enough to instruct the head maid to sort out rooms for our friends?”

“Certainly, dear.”

“I'll be away early in the morning on state business, so I won't see you, but do have some breakfast before you leave. And with that, I'll bid you *adieu* and *bon voyage*,” he said, shaking their hands in turn and leaving the room.

9. The Lower East Side

They were up quite early the following morning, woken by a deep-toned bell ringing in a tower to signal the end of the curfew. The bed Ellie had been allocated was exceptionally comfortable and she had a really good night's sleep, awakening relaxed and rejuvenated.

Now they were downstairs, having breakfast in a small dining room provided for important guests.

“So, what's the latest clue, Ellie?” asked Bethany, chomping at the bit and eager to be off.

Ellie wiped her mouth on her napkin, had a sip of tea and read it out. “This one's short and sweet,” she said:

*Leave Beth-Galen
By the eastern walls
And go straight on, till
You see my barrel and balls.*

“Ready, then?” Bethany asked. “There's no time like the present.”

Ellie waited until she'd finished her tea. “Sure thing,” she said, rising to her feet. “But first of all, I vote that we use a little of our prize money to kit ourselves out with some more suitable clothes.”

Elzabet nodded. “Agreed. And we should pick up some provisions, while we're about it.”

Ellie tipped out the contents of the purse and arranged it in four equal piles. “There you are,” she said. “And don't spend it all at once.”

“Oh, Mistress Ellie, I cannot be this accepting,” Elzabet protested.

“Elzabet,” responded Ellie: “You will do as you're told and not complain! Now take your money. We wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for you helping drive off the wolves and guiding us safely to this city.”

“Well ... if you are insisting, I am thanking you very much,” beamed the sylvan elf, pocketing the coins.

Having said their goodbyes to the queen, they headed for town. It took a good hour wandering up and down the high-street, but their shopping spree was finally at an end. They each had a pack on their back now and the packs were bulging with goodies and necessities for the journey.

Ellie had wanted so much to buy the expensive, pretty dress that she'd seen in one of the shops, but Elzabet had counselled against the extravagance, suggesting instead that she bought some rather plain clothes from a seedy-looking emporium off the high-street. The most extravagant item she'd bought was a pretty little embroidered silk purse to hold the Elvenstone.

“So whereabouts is the eastern gate?” asked Gareth.

“Please to be following me,” replied Elzabet. He led them off the high-street and through a proverbial warren of a rat-infested ginnels and murky side-streets. They eventually came to Eastgate, a rather squalid main road full of street urchins and unsavoury-looking characters, leading not unnaturally to the eastern gate of the city.

Gareth had bought himself a short sword and he fingered the hilt nervously as they passed through this depressed quarter.

Ellie had assumed that once they were through the gate they'd emerge into open countryside, but apparently the population had outgrown the walls of the old city and the area was just as built-up outside as it was inside. And if anything it was even more squalid. She couldn't help contrasting the area with the sumptuous accommodation they'd been afforded at the palace.

Ellie was so touched by the plight of the children in that area that she was about delve into her purse and give some coins to the child beggars she encountered en-route. But Elzabet flashed his eyes at her and she realized that that would not be such a good idea.

“If these people are getting one whiff of the fact that we have money,” Elzabet explained, “then we would be lucky to be with our lives escaping.” And now Ellie could begin to appreciate his wisdom in insisting that they buy poor-looking second-hand clothes.

Ellie could feel a curious sensation of heat in her pocket through the thin cheesecloth of her dress and, reaching inside, she

pulled out the silk purse containing the gem. It was warm to the touch. Taking a peek inside the purse, she noticed that the stone was actually quite hot – but more than that, whereas when she'd first seen the gem it had been a clear blue, now it had a ruby-red glow to it.

She was about to remark on this worrying development and Elzabet seemed to read her mind. “Yes,” he said. “I, too am having the collywobbles, Mistress Ellie! We must be haste making.” And the sylvan elf deliberately increased his walking pace. Ellie kept looking back over her shoulder. She felt sure that they were being followed, but she couldn't see anyone.

10. A long and winding road

They were finally clear of the sprawling shanty town and onto a windy country lane flanked by dry-stone walls. Ellie checked the gem again. It was just comfortably warm and had resumed its former clear blue hue. “Panic over,” she said. Elzabet nodded and slackened his pace to allow Gareth to catch up.

“Elzabet?” asked Ellie when she got the chance. “I’ve been meaning to ask you ... You know when we first encountered Olson and it looked like he was going to start asking awkward questions?”

“Yes?”

“You were muttering something under your breath – some kind of incantation ...”

“Was I, Mistress Ellie? It is slipping my mind.”

“Oh, come on Elzabet, don’t be evasive. Did you – or did you not – make Olson change his mind?”

Elzabet raised his eyebrows and smiled. “The truth of the matter, Mistress Ellie, is this: I cannot deny that that was my intention.”

She’d take that as a “yes”.

They were passing through a village now and they had to wait whilst a farmer shepherded his flock of sheep across the road from one side to the other.

“Could you show me how to do that?” Ellie asked as they crossed the village green and skirted round the duck pond.

“It is taking a long period of training, Mistress Ellie,” Elzabet replied.

“Anyone fancy a drink?” asked Gareth as they passed an inviting-looking pub with white walls and black oak beams. There were seats and tables outside on the cobbled forecourt.

”Why not?” said Bethany and they settled themselves down whilst Elzabet went inside to order their drinks.

Ellie sat there basking in the sun and enjoying the scenery. There was a little chapel to the left of the pub and a long row of houses punctuated by the odd shop, whilst further off to her right was an embankment topped by a defensive tower that seemed to

have fallen into disuse. Well, it was so dinky that it looked more like a folly than a fortification. Maybe it was designed as a lookout? There were a couple of old cannons standing outside the gate leading into the tower, but they must have been there purely for decorative purposes; she could see no strategic value in placing them there.

Elzabet had returned by now and he dished out the drinks.

“Well?” Ellie asked him as he sat down. “Could you teach me how to project my will and my thoughts in this way?”

He thought for a minute. “People's thoughts is always being projected, Miss Ellie. But you are being a sensitive girl. I will see what I can be doing.”

“While we're all here, has anyone any thoughts about the last clue?” asked Bethany.

“Yes, read it out again, will you, Ellie?” requested Gareth.

“Okay, gang – here it is:

*Leave Beth-Galen
By the eastern walls
And go straight on, till
You see my barrel and balls.*

Ellie turned back to Elzabet. “And can you teach me how to read minds?”

He smiled. “It is not as simple as that, Mistress Ellie. It is not being so much something you are doing like a task. No, it is more a skill which you is having.”

“Hmm.” Well that was as clear as mud.

“Hey, you two,” Bethany complained. “Are you going to help us with this clue or is that a private party you're having?”

And “hmm” again. That was the first time Ellie had been on the receiving end of cross words from Bethany.

“Right, now keep your eyes peeled for barrels and balls,” Bethany requested.

“They'd have barrels in the cellar of a pub, wouldn't they?” suggested Gareth.

“Maybe ... but they're unlikely to have balls,” Bethany pointed out. And then she let out a little cry and drummed her hands on the table.

“What do barrels and balls have in common?” she asked.

Ellie shrugged. “They both begin with 'B'?”

“What's got a barrel?”

“A gun?” replied Elzabet.

“Pretty close,” Bethany encouraged him. “What's got a barrel and fires balls?”

“A cannon?”

“And where did you last see a cannon?” she teased.

Ellie laughed. “Up there in front of that tower!”

“Whoopee!” Bethany yelled. “Chaps, I think we're back in business.”

The group downed their drinks and Ellie took the empties back inside as a goodwill gesture, then they headed off across the village green and clambered up the grassy embankment to the tower. There were two cannons outside the gate and beside each one a number of rusty old cannonballs had been piled up in a decorative pyramid.

They searched the area thoroughly but did not come across the clue they were looking for. Then Gareth rolled up his sleeves and thrust his arm down inside the barrel of one of the guns. All he found was a heap of sweet wrappers. So he tried the second cannon.

“There's something here,” he reported. “Can't quite get my fingers round it, though.”

Unsheathing his sword, Gareth poked around in the barrel, then carefully withdrawing the blade he dragged something out. It was another oiled-leather package. He tossed it to Ellie. “There you go,” he said. “Don't say I never do anything for you.”

Ellie sat down cross-legged in the grass and they all gathered round as she tentatively opened the package.

“What's it say?” asked Bethany eagerly.

Ellie read it out loud:

Turn right when you find

Signs of good luck

And left when you come

To a mountain of muck.

Carry straight on till

You come to the Hall

You'll find the key

'Neath a stone near the wall.

I sing on the hour

*Alas, I cannot fly away
I lead a procession
Round the garden at midday.*

Suddenly Ellie became aware of a hot sensation in her pocket again and she stiffened. She had the distinct and eerie impression that they were being watched.

Elzabet seemed to sense it, too. His eyes darted this way and that and his long ears began twitching. "I am thinking we is being followed," he said at length.

"Snap," she nodded. Then something moving in her peripheral vision caught her eye. A shiver ran its icy races up and down her spine and she spun round, just in time to see three dark, hooded figures on horseback disappear behind the houses at the far end of the village green.

"Skagrats," Elzabet hissed.

"Skagrats?"

"These foul creatures bear allegiance to the dread Lord Develin," he explained, and he spat as he uttered the words.

Elzabet seemed to have a particular hatred toward the skagrats and Ellie wondered why this should be.

"I was having an elder brother," Elzabet explained. "The skagrats butchered him when they was our woodland encampment sacking. They slaughtered everyone in the village – men, women and children, the old and the infirm. Nobody are they sparing. That is why I am detesting them so much."

"And what they are doing with the women and with the bodies is unspeakable."

That was awful.

"Well, all the same, we should be leaving," Bethany decided, and they headed back across the green and past the pub to rejoin the lane leading out of village.

There was no sign of the horsemen now, but the Elvenstone still felt quite hot in Ellie's pocket. They couldn't be that far away.

The group left the sleepy village and carried on down the winding country lane. The road must have turned toward the south, because Ellie could see the hills in the distance and beyond those a range of snow-capped mountains that looked like the spines on the back of some gigantic dragon.

"They call those the Dragon's Teeth," Elzabet told her. "The

land between the hills and the mountains beyond is called Azakstan.”

She remembered now: Lord Develin had already taken the garrison town of Dun-Hallow in that region.

“Develin won't be stopping there,” Elzabet added. “He won't be content until he has the whole of the Free Lands taken.”

A mile or two down the road they came across another hamlet. There were no more than half a dozen little terraced cottages on the right hand side of the road. On the right, by a road junction, there was what looked like a blacksmith's workshop, judging by all the old horseshoes nailed to the wall, and there were a few farm buildings dotted here and there.

As they passed through the hamlet, Ellie couldn't help but notice that the place was deathly quiet. There were no people about, no twitching curtains, and no sign of horses or work going on in the blacksmith's. And the gardens were all so wild and overgrown.

“It's a ghost village,” Elzabet explained. “All the inhabitants were perishing in the Black Death.”

“The what?” she asked.

“The time of the Great Plague.”

“Oh, I see.”

They carried on walking for a few moments but then Bethany called them back. She was standing at a road junction beside the blacksmith's workshop. Apparently she'd found something.

“What's up?” Ellie called, as they retraced their steps.

“Nothing,” she said. “It's just that I think you've missed the turn.”

“Huh?”

“How's it go?”

Turn right when you find

Signs of good luck

And left when you come

To a mountain of muck.

Carry straight on till

You come to the Hall

You'll find the key

'Neath a stone near the wall.

“And what are those, might I enquire?” Bethany asked,

pointing to the wall.

“Horseshoes, of course,” replied Ellie.

“And what are horseshoes?”

She suddenly twigged: “Signs of good luck!”

“Precisely. So I figure we turn right down this track.”

“Smart thinking, Neddle!”

The group trudged down the heavily-rutted wagon track for nearly half a mile. It was arduous going, but at least the weather was fine. The track looked like it would be a sea of mud in the rainy season.

“Well, someone certainly seems to still live around these parts, judging by the ruts in the track,” Ellie observed.

“You're not kidding,” Gareth chipped-in, holding his nose. They were just passing by a farmyard and the stench was overpowering. And yet people who lived out in the country seemed to be immune to the stuff. She had never seen so much raw manure piled in one place in her life. But she guessed that's all the animals had to do – just eat and poo, all day long. Well, that and be constantly flicking your tail to get rid of the infernal flies. They were an absolute menace.

“The mountain of muck!” Gareth suddenly yelled out. “This is the mountain of muck!” and he pointed to the huge heap of manure in the farmyard.

“Well done, Gareth,” Ellie cooed. “Okay, so we need to turn left here. I presume that means left through the farmyard?”

“Looks that way, Ellie,” Gareth said, still holding his nose. “There's a stile at the far end.”

So, they carefully made their way through the farm as if tiptoeing through a minefield, until they reached the wall and climbed the stile. Fortunately the wind was blowing the other way, so it was safe to breathe again.

The group skirted round the edge of a corn field, following the hedgerow, until they came upon a second stile. Once over that they were back on a dirt road leading up to a rather impressive old building nestling in amongst the trees.

“That must be the hall,” Gareth observed.

And so it was. They followed the dirt road right up to the rusty old wrought-iron gates, then up a long gravel driveway until they came to the rather grand-looking front door.

Ellie consulted the last piece of parchment:

*Carry straight on till
You come to the Hall
You'll find the key
'Neath a stone near the wall.*

There was a rockery near the door and Gareth was already on his hands and knees turning over every stone. "There you go," he said, holding up a big brass key and looking as pleased as Punch with himself. He went over to the door, inserted the key and turned it in the lock; then, pushing the door open, he bowed them inside. He was raring to go.

"Hey, let's slow down a minute," Bethany said, pulling him back. "How's the verse go, Ellie?"

*I sing on the hour
Alas, I cannot fly away
I lead a procession
Round the garden at midday.*

"Any ideas, anyone?"

There were no takers, only a shaking of heads.

"Right, so what we'll have to do is work through the house methodically from room to room," Bethany requested.

They were in a well-lit porch. Someone had built shelves around the window-sills to either side of the door and the shelves were covered with potted plants. There was a huge cactus that splayed over the edges of its pot like an upturned mop head, its stems being made of little leaf-shaped segments laid end to end. And on the tip of each of these branches, though it was neither Christmas nor Easter, was a spiky, bright cerise flower. There must have been a couple of hundred of the flowers either in bud or in full bloom.

Propped in the window was a sign which read "No hawkers' circulars, charity envelopes, trick or treats, or salesmen", and under one of the shelves was a shopping trolley and a folded umbrella. Other than that, the place was bare.

Moving on from the porch through an inner door they came into a hallway. To their right was a set of steep stairs. There was a hat stand and on the wall there were a series of pegs with coats hanging from them. Ahead of them, mounted on the wall was a large, gilt-framed mirror and beneath that a sideboard in highly

polished wood. The top of the sideboard was piled high with box upon box upon box of home-made cosmetics, brochures and invitations – hawkers' circulars, if you like, mused Ellie.

The passage turned a corner at the end and there were four doors. One appeared to lead out into a garden, but it was locked and bolted. The second was labelled “Morning Room” and in here were yet more cupboards and drawers full to the brim with all sorts of knick-knacks and oddments that the owner was perhaps reluctant to dispose of in case they came in handy one day. The room was dominated by a big bay window which looked out onto the walled garden, and again there were potted plants all along it. There was also a sturdy table with a sewing machine set into its top; a tailor's dummy; an exercise bicycle, and a folding table with a green felt top, presumably used for playing card games on.

The third door led into a front lounge. There was a big leather three-seater settee and matching armchairs; a large oak display cabinet full of ornaments taking up much of the back wall, and a small cabinet full of books tucked in a corner of the room. At the far end was an old cast iron fireplace with a set of brass utensils and a brass coal scuttle. Above this stood an elaborate mantel-piece with a built-in mirror at about head and shoulder height. The mirror was engraved with a message which read “Dear Lord, bless this house and all those in it,” which was really kind of cute. Around the room there were half a dozen paintings which appeared to depict the hunting, killing and spit-roasting of wild deer. And on one of the walls there was an old-fashioned cuckoo clock in the shape of an alpine cottage with a little gated garden out front, elegantly carved out of a delicate piece of painted and varnished wood.

The fourth door led into a small living room. This room was dominated by a cast iron cooking range and coal fire built in one. Other than a sideboard full of cutlery and crockery, a couple of dining chairs, a folding dining table and a prominent dartboard, this room was bare. Through the living room they found a kitchenette, full of the usual provisions and equipment. Nothing out of the ordinary.

And upstairs? They found five bedrooms with little in them other than the usual – beds, dressing tables and bedside lockers. Oh, and a commode. There was a bathroom and a toilet with a

huge mahogany throne in it; and they also found a narrow door and a steep set of steps leading up to an attic workshop with a work bench and lots of tools.

Bethany figured the place to look would be in the garden, but there seemed no way into it: the door was locked and barred and all the windows looking out onto the garden had been nailed fast, presumably to stop people breaking into the house.

At length – and none the better for their exploration – the group all trooped back into the front lounge to have a sit down and think some more about the latest clue. According to the clock on the wall, it was just coming up to noon. Ellie pulled her pocket watch out: it read 11:45 – their guestimate hadn't been that far off the mark. She corrected the time and put the watch back in her pocket.

“Okay, gang, let's go through this once again:”

*I sing on the hour
Alas, I cannot fly away
I lead a procession
Round the garden at midday.*

And at that precise moment, a little door opened in the attic of the cuckoo clock house and a bird popped its head out. They all turned their heads in unison. The others had never seen a cuckoo clock before.

Twelve times the little bird came out, cuckooed, and bobbed back in again – once for each hour. And then on the ground floor of the house two more doors opened and a little figure shaped like a girl and a boy leading a horse and cart came out, paraded round the garden and went back in through the other door.

*I sing on the hour
Alas, I cannot fly away
I lead a procession
Round the garden at midday.*

That had to be it!

Ellie jumped up out of her chair and went over to look at the cuckoo clock. And just as the procession of figures was parading around the model garden for the second time, she caught sight of something in the back of the cart. It was another small piece of parchment. She plucked it out, unfolded it and sat down again to read out the message:

*My walls are dusty
You'd better get undressed
Seek a secret room
Within my breast.*

"Well, that's a bit short and sweet, isn't it?" pondered Bethany. "It doesn't tell us where to go first."

"Maybe it's something else in the house?" said Gareth.

"Why get undressed?" wondered Ellie

"Because if the walls are dusty you might be your clothes dirty getting," said Elzabet.

"Could be."

"OK," said Bethany. "What's got dirty walls and a breast?"

"What about other words instead of 'dusty'," Gareth asked.

"Chalky."

"Dirty."

"Grimy"

"Sooty."

"Smoky"

"What did you say again, Gareth?"

"Sooty."

"And what's that?" asked Bethany, going over and clapping her hand on the wall.

"A mantel-piece."

"No, dodo – I mean behind the mantel-piece?"

"A chimney."

"A chimney-breast to be precise."

*My walls are dusty
You'd better get undressed
Seek a secret room
Within my breast.*

All eyes were turned toward Gareth and judging by his expression he knew what was coming.

"You're volunteering me, aren't you? You want me to take my clothes off and climb up that chimney to see what's up there, don't you? I mean – what if someone comes in? What would they think? How do you think I'd feel. What if ..."

"In your own time, old chap," said Bethany. "To save you the embarrassment, we'll be in the next room."

A few minutes later, Gareth's head popped round the door

into the living room. He was covered from head to foot in soot and he was clutching his jumper in front of him for the sake of decency. Gareth tossed a small tiny silver box to Ellie, muttered something about going upstairs to get a bath, slammed the door-to and he made a swift exit.

Ellie waited until Gareth had returned before opening the box – it was only fair. “The blooming water was f-f-f-freezing!” he complained, still rubbing himself down with a grimy-looking towel. “I had a devil of a job cleaning that stuff off. Have you any idea how gungy soot becomes when you mix it with water?”

“Oh, you’re such a dear,” Bethany cooed and she planted a big sloppy kiss on his cheek, then turned to Ellie. “Over to you, maestro.”

Ellie opened the little box. There was a scrap of parchment tucked inside and the box was filled with some kind of fine powder. She dabbed a tiny quantity on her finger and licked it. Yach! It was quite bitter and it burnt the tip of her tongue. “Any idea what this is?” she asked, passing the box around.

“Snuff, Mistress Ellie,” said Elzabet. “You is taking a pinch and sniffing it up your nose.”

“How positively disgusting,” snorted Bethany, trying some.

Oh, well. It’s a pretty little box. It might come in handy, thought Ellie and she popped it in her pocket for safe-keeping, and without further ado she cleared her throat and read the latest clue out to them:

*I have no body
I wear a crown
Go east twenty paces
And then dig down.*

11. The Skagrats and the key

No sooner had the group left the Hall and started to wander down the driveway back toward the road, than the Elvenstone began to glow hotly in Ellie's pocket. "Trouble!" she yelled to the others.

Gareth fumbled with the hilt of his sword and unsheathed it. Elzabet slipped the bow off his shoulder and fitted an arrow to it.

There was a crashing sound in the bushes over to their left now and a rider in a long black cloak suddenly plunged out from under cover. It was one of the skagrats.

They turned back, hoping to make a run for it back to the Hall, but there was a second rider there already barring their way, with his sword held menacingly in one hand and a burnished metal shield fastened to the other arm.

Elzabet let fly an arrow at the figure to their left, but the creature anticipated the action and fended the arrow off with his shield. The arrow glanced off harmlessly and stuck in the ground. They took advantage of that moment, however, to flee into the bushes to the right hand side.

A third rider was approaching now, coming up the driveway to block any escape in that direction. All they could do was to press deeper into the trees.

Behind them were the three riders, moving slowly and deliberately through the bushes. The skagrats were biding their time, knowing that the four of them could neither fight them nor escape. Ahead of them lay a gully where a stream cut deeply into the land.

"What do we do now?" Gareth wanted to know, peering down into the gully.

"Pray," said Bethany.

"Just stand exactly where you are," advised Elzabet and they watched as one of the riders caught sight of them and spurred his horse on, drawing his heavy scimitar as he went.

Ellie was about to bolt for it, her heart was pounding – but Elzabet caught hold of her by the arm and held her still. Surely he couldn't be in league with the skagrats, too? She looked balefully

into his eyes. “Not you, too?” Gareth was oblivious of all this. He just stood there with his short sword in his hand, ready for anything.

The rider was nearly upon them now, galloping full pelt toward Elzabet.

“Oh God – we’re going to be killed!” screamed Bethany, but Elzabet had tight hold of her, too. The rider leant down, ready to take Elzabet’s head off as he passed.

In that split second, Elzabet pushed Ellie out of the way and dived to the ground himself, taking Bethany down with him.

And in that same split second the rider suddenly saw the precipice looming ahead. Too late – he was already flying through the air and being dashed against the rocks on the way down. Finally, he and the horse lay motionless at the bottom of the gully. And only now could Ellie see the wisdom in Elzabet’s actions.

But there were still two riders left and they were coming through the trees now. One of them has seen Ellie and was heading straight at her as she ran through the trees. The stone in her pocket was almost too hot to touch now.

Without knowing what she was doing, she snatched the Elvenstone from the silk purse and held it out in front of her. It was shining brightly and almost seemed as if it were on fire. The horse faltered and reared up as if it were terrified of the light that shone from the Elvenstone.

The rider was unseated and came down with a heavy thump in its armour and lay motionless in the undergrowth, but the horse charged on, knocked the stone from Ellie’s hand and sent her sprawling.

And then Ellie saw the third rider slowly advancing toward her. There could be no escape this time.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, another rider appeared – but it was not a skagrat. This rider wore bright silver chain mail, a scarlet cloak and a plumed helmet just like those the soldiers wore at Beth-Galen.

The remaining skagrat took one look at the newcomer and he whipped his horse and was off through the trees and away.

The proverbial knight in shining armour dismounted now, tethered his horse and walked over toward Ellie, checking on the way to see if the fallen skagrat was dead or alive. He used a

simple method to achieve this end: he thrust his sword into a chink in the creature's armour and the creature screeched, showing that it was alive. And then he thrust the sword deeper, and the creature was dead.

"The only good skagrat is a dead skagrat," he explained as he neared Ellie.

That voice sounded familiar.

The knight bent down and retrieved the shining Elvenstone. "Yours, I believe?" he said and tossed it to her. It was still ruby red, but it was not quite as red or as hot as it had been. She put the stone back in the silk purse and tucked it away in her pocket.

"I know," said the knight. "You don't recognize me with my clothes on, do you?" The figure wiped the blade of his sword, sheathed it and struggled to lift the helmet from his head.

"Olson!" Bethany called as the others came to rejoin them. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been tracking you since you left Beth-Galen," he said. "The king was wise to have me follow you. He was worried for your safety – and rightly so."

"Perhaps I might accompany you on your quest?" he enquired.

"You're more than welcome," agreed Gareth.

And so they retraced their steps down the driveway from the Hall and rejoined the road. As the last clue hadn't been given specific directions, they could only assume that they were meant to continue straight on.

It was mid afternoon by the time they reached the next town – Ard-Balin. Olson could have made it in a fraction of the time on horseback had he been on his own, and even Ellie, let alone the foot-sore Gareth, was beginning to wish that she'd bought a horse when she was in Beth-Galen. Still, it wasn't so bad. Olson let them take turns riding on the back of the horse while he clanked along in his armour.

"So how's Princess Flavia and – what's his name? – Keetch the bookseller?" asked Ellie as they sat down for a rest on a wall by the side of the town cemetery.

"Well," reported Olson. "The princess has never been in better spirits, the bookseller has overcome his nerves and been accepted into the family – well, by all but the princess's toffee-

nosed lady-in-waiting, that is. And they're to be married by the end of the month. The king and queen are thrilled and they're excitedly making preparations for the happy occasion. I understand that you are to be invited if you can get back in time for the wedding.”

Meanwhile, Gareth – who had a nose for good food and drink – had spotted a pub, the King's Head, across the road. He'd had a look inside and came back to report that they served all sorts of snacks in the bar. Apparently they had giant pork pies and pickled onions; baked potatoes and grated cheese, and toad in the hole on the menu.

For her part, Bethany had popped across the road to do a spot of shopping: having given the last clue some thought, she'd decided to have a look in the hardware store for a compass and a spade. She got the compass, but in the end she had to settle for a little hand trowel. Still, it was better than using your bare hands.

That done, they adjourned to the King's Head. Bethany was telling them all about a tramp who'd accosted her as she came out of the hardware store. “Smelly old man,” she said, turning up her nose in disgust. “Of course, I didn't give him anything. He'd most likely have spent it on a bottle of spirits or something. Yach!”

Ellie had the leather-bound book out and was flipping through to find the latest clue. “Ah yes, here it is,” she said, between rather unladylike mouthfuls of pork pie:

*I have no body
I wear a crown
Go east twenty paces
And then dig down.*

Bethany dipped in her pack and pulled out the compass and the trowel. “Ready when you are,” she lilted.

“Is there something you're not telling us?” asked Gareth, already through his second pork pie and third giant pickled onion.

“That's for me to know and for you to work out,” Bethany retorted cryptically with a deadpan expression.

“You already know, don't you?” said Ellie.

Bethany cracked up. “Yes, I do, actually. You see ...”

“Hey, don't spoil it!” interjected Ellie.

“Okay, I'll play along – what's got no body and wears a crown?”

“A king?” asked Olson.

“You're getting warm ...”

“A king's head!” called Gareth, showering the table with half-chewed pork pie.

Bethany pretended to brush herself down and wipe the remnants on Ellie's sleeve.

“Precisely. Give that boy a lollipop!”

“Oh don't – that reminds me of Ms Arkwright.”

“You know, I've hardly given SunnyDene another thought since we landed here,” said Bethany. Then the truth dawned on her. In an instant, the bubble of euphoria which had buoyed her up simply burst. “Oh, hell: we'll have to be getting back soon ...”

Bethany pulled herself together. “All the same, gang: eat up. We have work to do. Or rather you do, Gareth.” She passed him the trowel.

“Oh, thanks a bundle!” he huffed.

Five minutes later they were standing in the entrance to the King's Head and Bethany was taking a bearing with her compass. “East it is,” she said and pointed directly across the road into the graveyard. The old tramp came past again, trying to tap them for money. “Spare ten scruples for a cuppa char?” he begged them.

“Just ignore him and he'll go away,” hissed Bethany, turning her back on him.

They walked across the road counting the paces. Ellie and Gareth had only got to ten when they reached the edge of the graveyard. Bethany and Elzabet had shorter legs than the others and they were already up to thirteen. And Olson was only up to nine.

“Well, thank Heaven it's not dark,” Ellie observed.

They clambered over the low wall and walked on across the cemetery avoiding the gravestones as best they could. Finally they came to rest. Olson was a couple of steps ahead; Bethany and Elzabet were six paces short of where she and Gareth had ended up.

“Hmm. It all rather depends on who has been out setting these clues, doesn't it?” Olson observed.

“Any ideas, guys?”

Bethany thought for a minute, as she had a tendency to do. “I reckon it's got to be an adult – someone more Olson's size than

ours. I vote we start digging where he is and move back toward you if we don't strike lucky."

That sounded reasonable enough. "OK, take it away, Gareth."

Olson moved out of the way and Gareth started cutting round the perimeter of the hole, pulled up a square of turf and started digging. He dug down about a foot, found nothing and moved on to take up another piece of turf and dug some more. Again he found nothing.

It took Gareth thirty minutes of digging and filling in and digging some more before he came across the oiled-leather packet. And it hadn't been buried at all, really –he found it just underneath one of the pieces of turf he cut.

"All that work!" he sighed. But at least they had the package.

Ellie helped fill in the holes and level out the mole hills, then they left the graveyard and sat on the wall to study the next clue. She took out the little leather-bound book, slipped the piece of parchment inside with the others and read it out:

You'll have to use your brains

To reach this key

But you'll find it in plain sight

At number fifty three

"Right, that sounds clear enough," Ellie said, closing the book and returning it to her pocket. "Let's be off."

Olson went to retrieve his horse which he'd left tethered to a branch in the cemetery to eat its fill of the long grass. Then the group wandered off across the road, checking the house numbers as they went.

"47 ... 49 ... 51 ... Here we are – number fifty three," Gareth called out.

They were just about to walk straight in the house when a wizened old man came round from the back yard. "Yes?" he asked. "Whatchoo want? If you've come to sell me something, I've already got one. If you've come to beg money, I ain't got none. And if you're from the council complaining about the chickens, you can sod off!" the old man said.

Ellie tried the direct approach. "We've come about the key," she said.

"Oh, 'ave you now? Well that's different. You'd better come

in. And wipe yer blooming feet on the mat!" he told them, leading the way inside.

When the old man had mentioned chickens, Ellie had expected him to mean he kept chickens in a run at the back of the property. The last thing she expected was to find the chickens running loose and roosting all over the house.

"Not a lot of call for the key puzzle these days," the old man said. They followed him through the house and up a flight of steep, narrow steps. "I thought all you adventuring types had found some new fad or newfangled helectronic gizmos to fill yer time. I tell you, one bit – when old King Zog was on the throne – it was the done thing. There were days when we had a queue of folks outside the door. But not anymore.

"The old dear used to do a roaring trade in tea and scones," the old man said wiping his runny nose on his sleeve. "Don't fancy a cuppa do you? I can soon put the kettle on. Only ten scruples a pot to you. Cheap at half the price."

"Thanks all the same, but we've just one," Ellie fibbed.

"Well, it's in here," the old man said and he showed them into an upstairs room. The room was bare other than for a small picture hung on one of the walls and two short chopsticks on the floor. A white line had been chalked diagonally across the corner of the room nearest the door. Across the bare floorboards, some distance away lay a silver key.

"Now I expect you'll be wondering what this is?" the man said rhetorically and he held his hand out, palm uppermost. Ellie was the first to twig that they should cross his palm with silver at this point. She gave him ten scruples and he looked at it disdainfully but pocketed it all the same.

"Well, you're trapped in this room."

"No we're not," protested Gareth.

The old man continued unabashed. "There's a locked door behind you."

"Oh no there isn't."

"Now pay attention, lad, and less of the lip. I'll say this only once. The object of this exercise is to retrieve the key without touching the floor beyond that chalk line. Now who's first to have a go?" he asked, and he held his hand out again to have it crossed with silver.

Gareth stepped forward and gave him ten scruples.

The old man ushered the others out, locked the door and pocketed the key. "And no, you're not allowed to use my key," they heard the old man telling Gareth.

"Give up?" they heard him say a few minutes later. "It's impossible, isn't it?"

Shortly afterwards, Gareth left the room looking rather crestfallen and the old man held out his hand again.

"Who's next?" he asked. "And no conferring please, ladies and gentlemen."

Olson stepped forward. As the tallest amongst them, if anyone could do it then he was in with a good chance. But again, he left the room with a shrug of his shoulders.

"And the next contestant, if you please?"

Soon enough there was only Ellie left and as yet nobody had succeeded in retrieving the key. She handed the old man the obligatory ten scruples and he ushered her inside and locked the door behind her.

Ellie stood at the edge of the chalk line and reached her hand down to pick up the key. It came as no great surprise to her to find that she was a good way short. Then she saw the chopsticks laid on the floor and picked one up, holding it out at arm's length. Again she was some way short. She even tried to balance on one leg like a ballerina and reach down, but to no avail.

She had noticed the picture hung on the wall beside her, but thought it merely incidental. Now she picked up the other chopstick.

"Is there some special reason why they should be triangular and not round?" she asked the old man, but he merely shrugged and said nothing.

If only she could fasten them together. But how? She thought long and hard about the issue, whilst the old man merely watched, feigning disinterest.

And then it dawned on her.

If she could fasten the two chopsticks together, then they'd be long enough to reach the key. But how? One of her socks would be too thick, surely? She could always tear a strip off her dress, but that would be an unthinkable waste. Or she could use the lace holding her top together. Her eyes went back to the picture on the

wall and she took it down.

First of all she noticed that there was a scrap of parchment tucked into the frame at the back. She surely had to be on a winner here! “Is this for me?” she asked.

“Only if you succeed in the task,” the old man told her and he snatched the parchment from her grasp and stuffed it in his own pocket.

Ellie undid the string from which the picture had been hung and tied it around the two sticks to bind them together, then going again to the edge of the chalk line she reached out and managed to touch the key. Now, very carefully, she drew the key towards her, then she scooted it over the line and picked it up.

The old man smiled and, reaching in his pocket, he gave her the precious piece of parchment. “Oh, and as for all the silver I've taken,” the old man said: “It's not for me, you understand – it's for the kids in the orphanage down the road.”

“Here,” Ellie said, digging in her purse and finding a Noble. “Give that to the kids, too. I spent some time in an orphanage myself, so I know what it can be like.”

Well, she thought: it just goes to show that you should never judge a book by its cover. And with that thought in mind, she unlocked the door, handed the key back to the old man and walked out of the room.

“Impossible, wasn't it?” Gareth sighed.

“Nearly,” she said, “but not quite.”

“I know – I got within inches of it, too,” Bethany commiserated.

“No – I mean nearly but not quite impossible,” Ellie corrected her.

“You did it? You mean to say you did it!” Bethany was cock-a-hoop.

“And I've got the certificate to prove it,” Ellie beamed, waving the piece of parchment in the air.

“Amazing!”

“But how?” Gareth wanted to know.

Ellie would not tell. “It's simple when you know how,” she said.

The old man merely held his hand out. “Do you fancy another go?” he asked.

“It's okay, thanks,” said Gareth: “I think I'll take a rain check.”

12. Olrek Frobisher-Kleinehosen

So what's it say, Ellie?" they all wanted to know, jostling round her.

"Steady on, chaps, steady on! Here it is:"

My first is in heaven and in hell

The rest sounds like something you blow

I don't stick around too long in one place

I come and I go, you know.

"Well, the first letter has to be either a 'H' or an 'E'," Gareth decided, after mentally juggling the letters in his head, but that's as far as they got.

It was getting quite late in the day now, so again they adjourned to the King's Head. They decided to take a couple of rooms for the night: Olson, Gareth and Elzabet in one room and Ellie and Bethany in the other. The rooms weren't exactly palatial, but at least they'd get a good night's rest and they could get a much-needed bath and a change of clothing. Talk about the tramp that Bethany was so strung-out about – they were beginning to hum themselves.

Bathed and changed, they all went down to the bar and ordered a meal and they sat down to relax. Well, that was the intention, but if the truth be known they spent more time trying to brainstorm the latest clue than relaxing.

"So what 'sounds like something you blow'?" asked Bethany, starting the ball rolling.

"Explosives?" suggested Gareth. Unlikely, but they didn't want to rule anything out or disrupt the process.

"Your nose?" said Elzabet, sneezing serendipitously.

Nice one.

"A trumpet?"

Oh, boy – that had opened up a whole host of possibilities.

"Bagpipes? Bassoon? Clarinet? Cornet?"

Just one cornetto ...

"Cuddly toy?"

"Fife? Flute? Flageolet?"

Eh up! the Talking Thesaurus was off now.

“Horn? Oboe? Piccolo? Pan pipes?”

“Penny whistle? Pipe? Pitch-pipe? Recorder?”

“Sax? Saxophone? Trumpet?”

And at the end of all that they were still none the wiser.

“Okay, gang: what doesn't 'stick around too long in one place'? What comes and goes?”

“The wind?”

“Money?”

“Farts!” chortled Gareth.

“Funny ha-ha.”

“Tramps!” laughed Gareth.

Bethany got the joke alright, but she wasn't laughing. “Oh, my God,” she said: “I've just had the most awful feeling ... Ellie, I think you'd better read that verse out again.”

Ellie dutifully obliged:

*My first is in heaven and in hell
The rest sounds like something you blow
I don't stick around too long in one place
I come and I go, you know.*

“It's not 'tramp',” Bethany said at length: “It's h-oboe: 'hobo'.”

“What's that?” asked Olson.

“An itinerant, usually unskilled worker,” Bethany told him straight off the top of her head. “A homeless, needy person. A tramp ...”

“Ah ...” said Ellie. “You mean the kind of guy who kept pestering us for money earlier today? The one we chose to ignore and pass comment about?”

“Yes, Ellie – and there's no need to rub my nose in it. That's precisely what I mean.”

“Upon my word,” commented Elzabet: “The Good Lord is indeed working in mysterious ways.”

“Oh, come on,” sneered Olson. “You don't buy into all that bullshit about a Grand Scheme do you? Get real!”

“Good evening, gentlefolk.”

As one they turned and stared.

“May I join you?” asked the old tramp.

“Er ... um ...”

“Thanks awfully. That's very decent of you, chaps.”

They could but sit and stare as the smelly old, snaggletoothed itinerant pushed his way through to take a seat at the head of the table, right next to poor old Bethany.

“Tell me – seem to be a little short – you couldn't lend me fifty scruples for a bite to eat could you?”

“Um ...”

“You would? Oh, thanks awfully. That's jolly decent of you. Had a tough spot of luck these past few years, you know.”

The man consulted an old gold pocket watch and frowned. He checked another on his left wrist as if to make certain; then a third watch on his right wrist. “You don't happen to have the correct time, do you?” he asked. “Only I seem to have 19:30 hours on one, 20:32 on the other and 20:28 on my backup. It's not too late to order, is it?”

Ellie looked at her pocket watch. “I have 8:31 on mine,” she told him.

“Really? And what's that in old money?” he joked.

“20:31,” she replied.

“Splendid.” And he promptly reset all three watches and ceremoniously wound them up.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked.

“Not as yet,” said Ellie. “We were just about to order, but we got rather carried away in conversation.”

“Well,” said the man, pouring over the menu. “Rather fancy the idea of the *coq-au-vin* and a tankard of ale, if that's alright with you. What's everyone else having?”

Everyone else seemed to be deeply engrossed in their menus and struck dumb with embarrassment, leaving Ellie to make polite conversation with the man.

“Well, I think I'll have the fish,” she said at last. “What about you, Bethany?”

With a struggle, Bethany looked up from her menu and said that she'd also have the fish. In the end that's what they all had, with the exception of the tramp.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” the man said. “Completely forgetting my manners. My name is Olrek. Olrek Frobisher-Kleinehosen.”

“Lauriel El*Eth,” she replied, making a special point of smiling at the man. “But you can call me Ellie. And I'm very pleased to meet you, Olrek.”

“My name is being Elzabet,” said the sylvan elf.

“Olson.”

“Gareth Jones, sir.”

“Bethany Sparkes.”

At that point the landlady came round to take their orders. She eyed the tramp suspiciously, but said nothing.

“Tell me, sir,” said Olson, finding his voice at last. “You’re a military man, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Indeed. Colonel Olrek Frobisher-Kleinhosen to be strictly correct, but I don’t want to go pulling rank here on Civvy Street, as it were. Proud and fortunate to have served in King Zog’s own regiment, Olson. Fought in the First Great War.”

“So, if it’s not an impertinent question, Olrek, what brings you to Ard-Balin?”

The old tramp looked him in the eye. “What you mean, if I’m not mistaken, sir, is how come a hoffer and a gentleman such as myself has fallen on such hard times?”

“Well ...”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to beat around the bush, Olson. Truth is, fell madly in love with a young lady during the war, but alas she was murdered by the skagrat horde. Broke my heart, you see. Could never get over my grief or settle down in Civvy Street after that tragic misfortune ...”

“I’m sorry,” said Bethany, at last finding her own voice. “I’m really very sorry, sir.”

The old tramp smiled. “That’s alright, my dear – don’t fret. Might not think it, but I was young myself once, you know.”

The food arrived just then and they had ample opportunity to mull things over and reconsider their first, erroneous impressions of the tramp.

“So, tell me – what brings you here to Ard-Balin?” he asked and, looking at Ellie, Bethany and Gareth in turn, he said. “You’re not from around these parts, are you?”

Ellie exchanged glances with Elzabet. He appeared to have no objections, so she gave him a rather potted version of their story thus far and brought out the leather-bound book. Flipping through the pages, she showed him the first scrap of parchment they’d found, which had caused them to embark upon their epic quest. He studied it with interest:

*The realm is in turmoil
Lord Develin seeks power
If you want to save the day
You must leave within the hour.*

*Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together
And take it to Abshaur.*

“Well,” he said at last, “can't help you with the Elvenstone, I'm afraid, but Abshaur ...”

“What it is or where it is, we have absolutely no idea,” interjected Ellie.

“Well, tell you one thing – 'Abshaur' means 'the waterfall',” he said, and he began to draw a rough map on one of the napkins. “Now legend has it that there's a monastery that goes by the same name near a place called Zalzabil, somewhere west of Azakstan. More than that, I cannot say. Do hope you find this place safely – may God be with you. And a thousand and one thanks for the meal. Haven't eaten so well in years.”

“No, thank you, Olrek, you've been a great help!” said Ellie. The meal was cheap compared with what this information could be worth.

And at last, as they finished the meal and Colonel Olrek Frobisher-Kleinehosen bade them a fond *adieu* and *bon voyage*, he slipped a little oiled-leather package onto the table in front of Ellie and walked out and off across to the cemetery to get a good night's kip.

So Olrek had been in on this, too? Wonders would never cease.

“Well, are you going to open it now or save it until morning?” Bethany asked.

“Either way we'll probably lose sleep, in eager anticipation or in miserable frustration,” Ellie replied, “So I guess I might as well put you out of your misery:”

*Take some time out
For a day in court
And pronounce as best you are able.
The riddle is
How to sort out*

The children's allotted stable.

“And with that, playmates, I'll bid you a fond goodnight.”

13. Clearing the matter up

When the adventurers got up, they went down to order a hearty breakfast to set them up for the day ahead. They found the landlord already at work, rearranging the tables and chairs in the bar. “Tell me, do you know of any court being held in the town?” Bethany asked him.

The man waved his arms around him. “The court meets here every Monday morning at nine o'clock sharp,” he told them. “So, if you want any breakfast, you'd better order it now.”

Well, that was most fortunate, thought Ellie – they didn't have to go to the court, because the court was coming to them.

Soon enough the bar began to fill and people were filing in to take their seats. They headed for the bar to order drinks and found seats. There was an excited atmosphere in the crowd: it seemed most of them were there to watch the spectacle rather than participate in the proceedings.

Finally an impressive-looking figure arrived, wearing long black robes and a strange, tall cylindrical hat.

“All rise,” called the landlord.

The others rose to their feet as he entered and Ellie followed suit. So this must be the judge.

“Court is now in session, Judge Aluicius Varty presiding. Please be seated.”

“It's pronounced Farty, man – Judge Aluicius Farty,” the judge huffed. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

The judge sat down at a table across the room and took out a sheaf of papers, a quill and a pot of ink. “Call the first case,” he requested.

“First case,” repeated the landlord.

“First case,” called a man standing by a door between the bar and the smoking room next door.

Two men came into the court, bowed in the direction of the judge and stood by the bar.

“The facts of the case are these m'lud. A dog has fouled the pavement between the houses of Squire Ethan Trump and Bilius Portaskew. Each man claims that the other should clear the mess

up.”

“Hah!” someone called. “This should tax old Farty!” and there was sniggering amidst the assembly. “Why, it's obvious ...”

The judge was not impressed. And the way he glowered at the loud-mouth on the front row, Ellie had a feeling that the judge was going to make an example of him. He turned away disdainfully and studied the documents before him.

“Hmm, a most difficult case,” he said at length. Then he abruptly turned to the man on the front row and said with a smug satisfaction. “Brandling, since you are always so eager to share your thoughts with the court, you may pronounce upon the matter. I will abide by your decision.”

The man stood up, cleared his throat and addressed the bench. “Well, m'lud, since it is the duty of the judiciary to clear up matters in dispute – I pronounce that you should clear it up!” And, amidst howls of laughter, the man sat down again.

The judge was not at all amused, but he had given his word. “Call the next case!” he snarled and banged his gavel down.

“Next case,” the landlord repeated.

“Next case,” called the man by the door.

Three young boys came into the courtroom now, bowed in the direction of Judge Aluicius Varty and stationed themselves by the bar.

“Yes?” the judge prompted.

“M'lud,” said the landlord. “The facts of the case are these. These boys' father died and he left a Will. And in that Will he left them seventeen horses.”

The last verse suddenly sprang to Ellie's mind:

Take some time out

For a day in court

And pronounce as best you are able.

The riddle is

How to sort out

The children's allotted stable.

So that's why they were here today!

“And what's the problem with that?” asked the judge.

“Well, m'lud, in the Will the father left instructions that the stable was to be apportioned as follows: the eldest child was to receive one half of the horses, the next eldest one third and the

youngest one ninth.”

“I still fail to see why this should be a problem,” the judge retorted.

The landlord explained that it wasn't physically possible to divide the seventeen horses in this way. Two didn't go into seventeen, three didn't go into seventeen, and nor did nine.

“Why, it's simple: have the horses sold and distribute the proceeds,” the judge responded and he was just about to call the next case when the landlord spoke up again.

“I'm afraid that would infringe the terms of the Will, m'lud.”

No matter what solutions the judge came up with, the landlord shook his head and pointed to the clauses in the Will.

“Well, Brandling?” he turned to the man on the front row. “Do you know of any legal precedents? Do you have any flashes of illumination in this case? Does the Good Lord favour you with any words of wisdom?”

For once, even Brandling was at a loss for words. “I fear not, m'lud.”

Ellie looked to Bethany. All this time she'd been counting on her fingers and scribbling on a piece of paper.

The judge was speaking again and Ellie turned her attention toward him. “My verdict in this case is that it is impossible to discharge the terms of the Will,” he pronounced. “The horses are to be sold and the proceeds are to be placed in the public coffers.”

The court was filled with heated words at this unpopular judgement.

But at that moment, Bethany suddenly stood up. “I object!” she called out.

The judge fixed her with his eyes, on the very point of bringing his gavel down.

“You object?” he spluttered. “You object? And on what grounds, pray?”

“On the grounds that it's not impossible,” she told the judge.

“Step forward and explain yourself, girl!”

Bethany got up from her seat and crossed the court.

“Olson,” she called out. “You possess a horse, do you not?”

Olson frowned.

“And might I enquire where that line of questioning is leading?”

“It will become apparent in due course, m'lud, please bear with me,” Bethany replied.

“Very well. Answer the question, man. Do you or do you not have a horse?”

“Yes, m'lud.”

“And may the children borrow your horse?” Bethany asked. “Just for a few minutes.”

Olson didn't look quite sure, but he reluctantly agreed. “They may,” he said. “It's round the back in the stables. Do you want me to get it?”

“That won't be necessary,” Bethany told him. “But I would like the court to register that Olson is willing to lend his horse to the children.”

She approached the bench and tipped the contents of her purse out. Then she selected a number of coins and put the rest back.

“I have here seventeen Nobles,” she announced. And the court broke out into heated conversation over this great wealth in itself. Ellie and Elzabet exchanged worried glances over Bethany's indiscretion.

“Silence!” the judge demanded. “Let the girl have her say.”

Bethany continued unabashed. “Now, let each of these seventeen silver coins stand for one of the horses. Olson has offered to lend the children his horse and I have in my hand a gold coin to represent it.” She waved the coin in the air above her head.

“I will therefore add Olson's horse to the seventeen the children already have. The children now have eighteen horses in their possession.” Bethany scooped up the silver coins.

“Now we will proceed to apportion the horses in accordance with the terms of their father's Will. The eldest child shall have half of the eighteen horses, which is nine in total,” she said, and she laid out nine silver coins before the judge.

“The next eldest child shall have one third of the eighteen horses, which is six in all,” she said, and she laid out another six of the silver coins.

“And the youngest shall have one ninth of the eighteen horses, which is two,” and she laid out another two silver coins.

“Which makes in total seventeen horses,” she said, counting

them out.

“And that leaves one horse, which happens to belong to Olson.” Bethany waved the remaining gold coin in the air. “I give him back that horse, with my thanks.”

“Thus, m'lud, we have satisfied the terms of the Will.”

And with that, Bethany scooped up the coins, returned them to her purse and went back to her seat. The court was filled with a hubbub of conversation as the others tried to work out how this magical feat had been achieved.

At this point the landlord came forward to address the court. “Excuse me, m'lud, but there is still one clause in the Will which has yet to be satisfied.”

Bethany looked up anxiously.

“In addition to the seventeen horses, the father left a letter,” he said. “This letter was to be given to whomever could successfully discharge the other terms of the Will.” And the man strode across the room and placed the letter in Bethany's hand.

Bethany didn't open the letter until they were back upstairs in their rooms later that day. She was going to give it to Ellie to read out.

“Oh, no, Bethany,” Ellie declined. “You've done so very well today, you should read it out.”

“Hear, hear,” said Olson.

“Very well. When you're sitting comfortably, I shall begin,” she joked. “Now listen carefully, children:”

Dear Wayfarers,

You have done well. To have come this far you must already have one of the four fragments of the great Elvenstone in your possession and sufficient gold to pay your way. Guard the Elvenstone with your life and speak to none of its whereabouts or of your mission.

If our predictions are correct, by the time you read this letter the dread Lord Develin and his skagrat hordes will have swept out of Morakesh and taken Dun-Hallow and much of the land of Azakstan which lies to the south of the Free Lands. It is likely, too, that they will have been joined by the goblin legions and that Pendravina in the east may be the next to fall.

It is imperative that you locate the remaining fragments of the Elvenstone, that you bring them together, and that you return

them to the Guardians of the Secret at Abshaur. Godspeed, my friends!

I am your humble servant,

Mortimus Finkle,

Secretary to the Council of the Free Lands.

There was piece of parchment attached to the letter and Bethany read it out:

Dig here for treasure

By light of day

Follow me

I show the way.

“Ready, gang?” Bethany wanted to be up and at it straight away, but Elzabet shook his head.

“All work and no play is making Jack a dull boy, that is what I am thinking,” Elzabet said sagely.

14. The legend

It was an interesting old town, Ellie pondered, as they wondered up the road to do a spot of shopping and generally sightsee. “You know, this is absolutely wonderful,” she told Elzabet. “Where I come from, there's nothing like this. So much of our heritage has been lost over the ages, simply bulldozed to make way for ultra-modern developments.”

“Bulldozed?” he asked. Of course the elf had never heard of such a thing.

“Have you seen large siege machines?” she asked, as they left the high-street and ambled through a wooded park. There were quite a few other folk out walking or simply laid in the grass making the most of the sun.

“Machines?” he queried.

She backtracked. “You've seen huge catapults and battering rams – the kind of thing they use when they're laying siege to a city?”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Huge contraptions.”

So far, so good. “Well, we have huge um ... contraptions that move around called bulldozers. They're used to shift the rubble away when old buildings are torn down to make way for new ones.”

Elzabet raised his finger and he smiled to let her know that he'd worked out what she meant.

“These old buildings, though, like the inn down the road; the little houses and the warren of passageways that run between them; the parkland; the stone walls of a city ... All these things have such character. Their histories each have so many enthralling stories behind them. That wonderful heritage has been lost by and large.”

Elzabet nodded. “That is a very sad thing,” he agreed.

As they continued around the park, they passed by a tall statue of some eminent-looking figure. Standing on an octagonal plinth, he had his arm and finger outstretched and he was pointing into the distance. “Like that,” she explained.

“Where I come from, most of the land used to be forested,”

she told Elzabet, “but now so much of the woodland has been cut down over the centuries and the land has been built on or left to become bleak moorland.”

“Ah! There you are, you two,” called Gareth as they strolled along the path. “I’d almost given you up for lost.” The group had all agreed to meet up for a park for a picnic on the grass playing field not far from the statue.

“Did you get the bread and the meat for the sandwiches?”
Asked Bethany.

“Sure did.”

“And butter?”

She nodded and emptied the contents out of her pack. “Got a punnet of fresh strawberries, too.”

Gareth's eyes lit up.

“Anyone got a knife?” asked Bethany.

Gareth offered her his sword, but she declined. Elzabet lent Bethany his.

They'd nearly demolished the pile of sandwiches when Ellie noticed that Gareth wasn't eating. He was just sitting there staring into space.

“Not eating, Gareth?” she said. “That's not like you.”

“You're not going down with anything, are you?” asked Bethany.

“Penny for them?”

“Hewwo, wickle sweepy eyes.”

“I'm sorry – I was miles away,” he replied and dived into the sandwiches. “I was thinking about that latest clue, that's all ...”

Dig here for treasure

By light of day

Follow me

I show the way.

“... And I couldn't help thinking that it might be referring to that statue.”

Their heads turned as one toward the statue. Ellie had seen it already, but it hadn't really registered. It was the figure of a man with his arm and finger outstretched, pointing into the distance.

“The only thing is, I'm not sure where to start digging.”

They all got to their feet now and wandered across to have a closer look at the statue. Gareth pulled the gardening trowel from

his pack and took it with him.

“It looks rather like someone's already beaten us to it,” Olson said, pointing out the freshly uncovered earth all the way round the edge of the plinth, threatening to undermine the statue.

They hadn't noticed it before, but there was a little brass plaque on the plinth which read quite simply:

Dig here for treasure.

“Maybe we should dig over there, Gareth suggested, following the direction in which the figure was pointing. But again, when they walked over that way they found numerous signs of recent and older excavation.

“Hang on, let's sit down and think this through,” Bethany decided and they went to sit on the plinth in the shadow of the tall statue.

“First of all, why dig 'by light of day'?”

“So we can see what we're doing, dum dum,” laughed Ellie.

Bethany shook her head. “No, that's not a good enough reason.”

“Something to do with 'the light of day',” Olson pondered out loud.

Bethany scratched her chin. “What about 'the light of day'?”

“The sun is being out during the day, Mistress Bethany,” Elzabet chipped-in.

“So?”

“So, I am thinking the sun is a shadow casting,” the sylvan elf continued. “Look see.” And he pointed to the shadow cast by the statue – and in particular by the outstretched arm and finger.

“By gad!” said Ellie. “I think he's got it!”

“But when?” asked Bethany. “As the sun moves through the sky, so the position of the shadow moves correspondingly.”

“I am thinking, Mistress Bethany, that the treasure is to be found when the sun is at its highest in the sky.”

“At its zenith,” echoed Bethany. “That would make sense. What time is it, Ellie?”

Ellie took out the pocket watch. “About a quarter to twelve,” she told them.

“Very well. Let's finish off the picnic, and wherever the shadow is at midday, that's where we'll dig.”

So, that's where they did dig. The ground was baked hard on

the surface and it was heavy-going, so Olson relieved Gareth and did the bulk of the work. Suddenly the trowel struck something and he began to scoop the earth out from around the object with his hands. It was a small metal chest. Grabbing hold of the brass handle on the top, Olson heaved and pulled the chest clear. He brushed the earth off and passed it to Ellie.

Her heart thumping, Ellie clicked the two catches on the chest and flipped the top open. As soon as she saw the light radiating from the box, she knew that here was the second fragment of the Elvenstone. And it did not escape her attention that the stone was very warm to the touch and that it had a reddish hue. Clearly, they were not as safe as they might have thought in this town.

Ellie pulled the first fragment from the silk purse and held it close to the other, trying to work out how the stones might fit together. As she brought the stones closer she could feel them pulling in her hands as if they were magnetic. She let go and the two pieces snapped together, glowing even brighter. As she held the stone, she became aware of a blissful feeling of warm, healing energy that seemed to permeate every cell of her body from her head right down to the tips of her toes.

“Wow! That's fabulous! Unbelievable! Wicked!”

Everyone wanted to have a look and to hold the half-complete Elvenstone. Then, when their curiosity had been eventually satisfied, Ellie took the stone back, popped it inside the silk purse and put it back in the pocket of her dress for safekeeping.

She was about to close up the little chest and perhaps bury it again – she wasn't sure what to do with it – and then she noticed a little scrap of parchment in the bottom. It was the next clue in their epic treasure hunt.

Ellie picked up the parchment and slipped it in the leather-bound book with the rest. She read it and then she closed the book and put it away.

15. Liliantha

Ellie slept-in the next day and by the time she'd washed and dressed, everybody else was downstairs tucking into a hearty breakfast. For some reason, her appetite wasn't that good that day and she settled for beans on toast.

“Come on, then, Ellie, are you keeping the clue to yourself? What's it say?” Bethany wanted to know. Ellie was a little taken aback. Of course she had the Elvenstone and she had the clues, but she hadn't for a moment considered that any of the others might think she was hogging things. One thing she did know, and that was that she would have been severely disappointed not to have had custody of the Elvenstone. It did cross her mind whilst they were passing the second fragment around the previous night that the others each had as much right to it as she did.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” she said and she passed the little book over to Bethany. “Here, you have it for safekeeping.”

Bethany's face changed in an instant. “Why, thank you, Ellie! I appreciate that. And don't worry, I'll guard it with my life.”

In a sense the old clues were worthless now, but they were also a precious memento of their quest. Who knows, in a few years they might be looking back on these days – halcyon days? – salad days? – with satisfaction, perhaps sharing their experiences with their children and grandchildren?

Bethany found the clue, blew her nose heavily on her handkerchief and read out the verse:

Leave Ard-Balin by

The southern road

You'll find the next

At my abode.

Guess my name and

I lose my power

Free the princes

From the tower.

“Well, that sounds rather interesting and relatively straightforward,” observed Gareth.

They left Ard-Balin early that morning after settling up with

the landlord, and they headed south, looking for some kind of tower, as the clue had suggested.

The lane left the plain on which Ard-Balin stood and entered the woods, following the banks of a swollen river as it snaked its way down the valley.

This was Elzabet's country and he was clearly in his element, and he went skipping along beside them. But Ellie's thoughts were elsewhere. She couldn't help thinking about the Elvenstone. She'd become quite attached to the thing and last night she'd noticed that she was a little nervous of the others holding it, but had dismissed the idea. Was that greed or was it perhaps her destiny – or both? Something to ponder.

It wasn't long before they caught sight of another sylvan elf flitting through the undergrowth amidst the trees. Ellie pointed this out to Elzabet.

“You are one sylvan elf seeing?” Elzabet laughed. “Mistress Ellie I am seeing them like spots before my very eyes! Begging your pardon, but there is being at least a dozen and they has been watching us since ever we are entering the wood.”

Well, that was her told.

“Then why don't they come out and show themselves?” she asked.

“The elves are being shy,” he explained.

A little further into the woods and without warning, Elzabet began to emit a series of whooping noises. He sounded like a demented ape.

“What the hell are you doing?” Olson wanted to know.

“I am calling the elves, Master Olson,” he told him. “It is being a traditional greeting. I am telling them that they are needing not to fear; that you is friends.”

“Ah ... I see. Well, um ... carry on, then.”

Shortly afterwards, the elves began to come creeping out of the trees. One or two of them seemed to emerge from the undergrowth almost at the adventurers' feet. And they walked warily, bows in their hands and arrows at the ready. Ellie couldn't help wondering what might have become of their party had Elzabet not been along.

“Cease to be worrying, Mistress Ellie,” Elzabet reassured her. “They is not being cannibals like the skagrats. If you is not being

their enemy, then you is having nothing to fear.” And he left her surrounded by a small tribe of the wary creatures to go and greet one of the other elves. This elf wore the same fine ring mail as the others, but his green cloak was slightly more elaborate and Ellie took him to be the leader of the group.

After exchanging ritualistic greeting and a few words in a beautifully lyrical language that Ellie had no way of understanding, Elzabet brought the elf over. The leader said something to the others and they shouldered their bows and visibly relaxed.

“This is Aelfric,” Elzabet said, and he introduced the adventurers one by one.

“I am greatly pleased to meet you all,” the leader told them. “Come, let us retire to our encampment so that you may be entertained.”

“Your command of our language is excellent,” Ellie observed as they walked off through the trees.

“As a child, I had the good fortune to have a mentor from the Free Lands,” Aelfric explained. “And I spent some years moving in King Zog and King Dorian's courtly circles as ambassador to the sylvan elves.”

My, but that would make Aelfric rather old, Ellie pondered. And yet he didn't look a day over thirty.

“Well, here we are,” Aelfric announced as they came to a clearing in the woods. At first Ellie could see nothing other than a smouldering fire in the centre of the glade, then she heard a clattering in the trees as a rope ladder was let down. Looking up she saw that there were houses built in the branches of all of these old oak trees and rope bridges leading across from one to another.

“Welcome to Liliantha,” the leader said as they gathered in the clearing, and within minutes the place was alive with inquisitive elves, clamouring to find out who they were, what they were doing there and for news from the outside world.

Before long the fire was roaring and a number of the elves were busying themselves preparing food and rolling it up in large yellow leaves ready to cook by the side of the fire.

Meanwhile the adventurers were seated with Aelfric and a couple of older elves – Elders, Elzabet told them – discussing all manner of subjects. Most of the elves' knowledge appeared to be

oral and these Elders functioned as the tribal “memory-keepers”.

After the usual preamble about the weather and suchlike, the conversation proper started inevitably with a polite yet inquisitive “What brings you here?” which Ellie was loath to answer.

Elzabet smiled. “It is being alright, Mistress Ellie. You may be telling my kinsmen the whole of the truth. I am trusting them with my life. And besides, word of your quest is already reaching them.”

That was quite shocking, “But how?”

“We are able to communicate over great distances,” Aelfric explained.

Elzabet! “Telepathically?”

“That is a word I don't know, Ellie. But if you mean from mind to mind – yes, we are proficient in that arcane art.”

Aelfric leant forward and took Ellie's hand in his own. “Please be assured that your secret is safe with us, Ellie, and that the whole of the elven race is behind you in this noble quest.

“If you need an armed escort, my people would be only too happy to help out. You have only to say the word. Elzabet, you must teach these young people how to meld.”

“Do what?” asked Bethany.

“Amongst our people, my dear, when something is truly learnt by one of the Elders, it becomes a part of the communal pool of knowledge. Given training, it is possible for others to access this common knowledge to a greater or lesser extent.”

“How do you mean?”

“It is dependent on one's self-knowledge and on one's awareness. On one's spiritual development, if you wish. Of course, such skills are very useful in the service of one's people and of creation; but it must be remembered that they are only the by-products of a far greater development. And that is the quest for the Greater Harmony and Unity with the One.

“The Elvenstone itself will help you in this task,” Aelfric added. “The gem was mined by the Great Dwarves in the Dragon's Teeth mountains and presented to the sylvan elves after the First Great War in respect and gratitude for the assistance the elves gave in routing the skagrat hordes. The elves fashioned it into a cut gem and imbued it with its powers. And they in turn presented it to the Guardians of the Secret, to whom it must now

be returned.

“The Elvenstone is a receptacle and a channel for a very special and subtle, healing energy. Some call this divine grace, others a gift, yet others Baraka.”

“Yes,” said Ellie. “I’ve felt the healing power suffusing my body when I brought the first two pieces together. And I’ve noticed how hot and red it becomes when we are faced with danger.”

“You must learn to do more than merely transport the Elvenstone and bring its fragments back together, Ellie. You must learn to live with it and get to know it, and you must use it in constructive, benign, benevolent ways.”

“Tell me, Aelfric. Why was the Elvenstone split in four after the First Great War and hidden across the land?”

“I can see you’ve done your homework, my dear. It was essential that its powers be distributed about the Free Lands for a time in order that the realm might be re-stabilized and thrive after the war. But now it must be brought back together so that the Guardians of the Secret can use it to direct the fight against the dread Lord Develin. That is all we know.”

“And do you know where this place Abshaur is? I’m told that it means ‘the waterfall’ and that it may be near a place called Zalzabil, west of Azakstan.”

“Leave it with us,” Aelfric said. “My people will see what they can find out.”



The merry band bade farewell to the elves in the early afternoon and resumed their trek along by the bank of the river.

They’d been walking for a couple of hours and they were about due for a rest when they spotted the top of a tall tower in the distance. As they came closer, encouraged by the sight, it became clear that the tower stood on a small island in the centre of a lake.

“Can you swim?” Ellie asked Bethany and Gareth. They shook their heads.

“Neither can I,” she admitted. “Damn! I wish we had a boat.”

No sooner were the words out than Elzabet cried out gleefully and pointed. There, partly hidden in the undergrowth, was a rowing boat. But whether the boat had been there all along

or whether the old magical thinking had returned, Ellie did not know. “Well, thank goodness for that,” she laughed.

Olson tethered his horse to a nearby tree on a long lead and he stowed the saddle and panniers in the undergrowth, then he helped them to heave the boat into the water. He held the boat steady as they clambered in from the stern so as not to tip the thing up, and being the strongest, it was his task to row them across the lake.

“We don't know what we've been told. Hope to die 'fore I grow old!” he sang as he laid into the oars and got into a natural rhythm. You'd think he was on a military march at the double the way he acted. Still, he got them safely across and they all hopped out onto the shingle beach of the island. They hauled the boat up the beach to be on the safe side.

The crew had landed not far from the base of the tall tower. It hadn't appeared very big from far off, but now that they were standing beneath it, it looked colossal, built out of huge granite slabs.

There was a studded, blackened oak door into the tower. Olson led the way and Gareth followed, sword in hand. There were several small rooms in the tower, linked by a stone spiral staircase and there were signs of occupation in the rooms, but other than that they found nothing.

They found nothing that was until they came to the room at the very top of the tower. The door was bolted from the outside and they unlocked it and went in.

“Oh, thank God! I thought help would never arrive!” gasped a youth, jumping to his feet. He went over to shake his companion. “Darius! Wake up! We've got to get out of here!”

These must be the two princes mentioned in the clue.

Ellie was just about to say something when the door slammed-to behind them. They spun round to hear the bolt being replaced and see a pair of bloodshot eyes peering at them through a hatch in the door.

Olson dashed across to the door and tried to force it open, to no avail.

“Can't do that! Can't do that!” a wizened old man cackled on the other side of the door and he slammed the hatch shut just as Olson took a stab at him with his sword. The sword glanced off

the metal door in a shower of sparks.

“We'll be out soon enough, old man!” yelled Olson through the door. “And when we do, I'll have your guts for garters, your unmentionables for a tobacco pouch and your head on a spit!”

“Promises! Promises! Lots of empty promises!”

The hatch flipped open again and the little old man popped his head into the opening. “There's only one way to escape, my pretties – you'll have to guess my real name – and I'll give you a clue:

*My first's in bat and in ball
My next is in big but not in small
My third's in village but not in town
And my last's in keys but not in crown!*

And with that, the old man shut the hatch and went clattering down the stone steps cackling to himself. “They're not going to guess it! They're not going to guess it!”

Bethany did the wise thing and wrote the verse down whilst it was still fresh in their minds. So that was the secret of his power: they had to guess the old man's real name.

They turned away from the door and introduced themselves to their new cell mates. “I'm Delius and this is Darius, my brother,” one of them said.

“We've been stuck in here for months now,” said Darius.

“How did you come to be here?” asked Bethany.

“We were on our way to spend the summer holidays with our uncle, King Dorian, at the palace in Beth-Galen. We'd made camp for the night not far from here. In the morning we saw the island and the tower and, finding a boat moored by the lakeside, we thought it would be a bit of a wheeze to row across and have a look around. And, like you, that's how we ended up here.”

“But what interest does the old man have in you?” Ellie probed.

“Well, um ... the old man said we'd fetch a tidy price. Whether that means he's holding us to ransom or intends to sell us into slavery, we have yet to find out.”

“If you've been here for months, I'm surprised you haven't been released already or sold,” Ellie pondered. There was another option, of course, and that was that the princes were being held there as bait to lure other people into the trap. If so, they'd fallen

for it hook, line and sinker.

Olson and Gareth spent half of the day trying to figure out how to escape from the stone cell, and they came up with numerous ingenious but hopeless suggestions and their schemes met with no success whatsoever. In the end they sat down looking mentally exhausted and thoroughly dejected.

At last it was late afternoon and they heard the old man trudging up the steps. Moments later, a small hatch opened along the bottom of the door and a metal tray was thrust inside the Spartan cell, and almost immediately the hatch was again closed.

Bethany rushed to the door. "Abee!" she called.

"Nope," the old man called through the door and he was off again down the stone steps of the spiral staircase.

"Dash and bother!" Bethany cursed, and she joined the others on the floor.

The two princes had already taken their share of the food and drink and they were eating ravenously whilst the others just sat and stared.

"Bread and water!" Gareth complained.

"You'll get used to it soon enough and be thankful for it," said Darius between mouthfuls.

"Great," retorted Gareth and he disdainfully took his share.

At last, as their conversation was beginning to dry up, the evening drew in and they settled themselves down to spend a cold and comfortless night on the stone floor of the cell. The two princes shared the only mattress and they were not of a mind to share it with the others, let alone offer it to the girls.

Morning came and with it came more bread and water. "Give me the old tray," the old man barked. "That's it – pass it carefully and slowly under the door. And no funny business, mind!"

Bethany was up and out of bed in a flash. "Is your name Agee?" she asked.

"Nope and nope again!" the old man cackled and he slammed the hatch-to, and away he went. "They won't guess it! They won't guess it!"

"No? What about gold then?"

There was no reply.

That day had to be the longest that Ellie had had to put up with in the whole of her life. The others were far too dejected to

make conversation now, not even to help pass the time. Small wonder the two princes spent so much of their time sleeping.

And then it was evening again.

“Agel?” asked Bethany and she was going to try more, but as ever the old man was already out of earshot.

“Nope!” was all the old man would say as he trudged away down the steps.

The next day seemed even longer than the last, if that were possible. They were getting desperate now. Olson had managed to squeeze the tip of his sword through a gap in the side of the door and was trying to saw through the heavy metal bolt, but after an hour of getting precisely nowhere, he gave up. Standing on Gareth's shoulders, Elzabet had a go at loosening the bars of the little window in the outside wall of the sell. They couldn't even conjure up any decent food – only a dead rat. All their food was back in Olson's saddlebags over the other side of the lake.

“Agle?” screamed Bethany through the door, but there was no reply. “Oh, curse the man!”

They were so bored and frustrated by the end of the day that they settled down early. However, they couldn't really sleep on the cold, hard stone floor and more than once someone would get up and pace back and forth to warm themselves and loosen their aching muscles.

Ellie woke early the next morning to find Bethany and Gareth missing, and for a time she could not work out why that should be or how it had been achieved. If the old man had come in and taken them away she was sure to have woken up and noticed. No, they seemed to have simply vanished into thin air.

Then Ellie remembered and she let out a heavy sigh. She found a little stone on the floor and marked off all the days they'd spent together since they'd first entered Elvenglade. Seven. That's how long you could stay in DreamScape at one time with the standard version of the wristpad. Bethany and Gareth had arrived at Elvenglade a little earlier than she had, and so that meant her time there, too, must just about be up.

And as she was thinking this, the scene around her appeared to be dissolving before her eyes.

16. Back with a bump

Ellie shot bolt upright and her eyes darted all about her as she struggled to make sense of her surroundings and get her bearings.

After a few moments it dawned on her.

She was back home again – in bed.

“Oh, confound it!” Ellie cursed and fumbled under the pillow to find her watch. She seemed to have been away for days and yet it was still only 02:30 in the morning. That meant she still had time for another session in DreamScape.

Ellie clambered down from the top bunk, skipped across the passage and headed for the loo. Then, after getting herself a drink of water, she went back to bed. She flipped through the menus on her wristpad until she found “Resume” and hit the green “Go” button and settled down again.

When she next woke up it was to find herself back in the cell with the others at the top of the tower. When she landed, she went sprawling on the stone floor. Olson was standing by the door and he and Elzabet were discussing her absence. They simply couldn't believe it, let alone understand it. Bethany and Gareth were already back.

If Olson and Elzabet thought her disappearance strange, however, that was nothing to the disbelief etched across their faces when they saw her re-materialize right before their very eyes. Presumably Bethany and Gareth had managed to reappear whilst the others were still asleep, and for their part, they didn't seem at all surprised by Ellie's reappearance.

“H-h-how on earth did you manage that?” Olson wanted to know.

“I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to divulge that,” she replied, off the top of her head.

“Why not? Can you teach us? If we were all to disappear at the same time, then the old man would think we'd escaped ... he'd open the door and come in ...”

Bethany shook her head and backed Ellie up. “It doesn't work like that,” she said.

Ellie sat down on the cold floor in the cell, nursing a bruised

knee.

"I saved you some breakfast, Ellie," Bethany said. "Gareth was going to eat it, but I wouldn't let him."

"Well? Anyone got any bright ideas how we're going to get out of here?" asked Olson who was growing ill-tempered and weary of being cooped up in the confines of the cell.

"Like the old man said, Olson – the only way out of here is if we can work out his name."

"That's what he says!"

Ellie had been thinking. "You know Aelfric was telling us that the elves are able to communicate over long distances, telepathically, Elzabet? And you know he told us we only have to say the word and his people would help us?"

The elf nodded.

"Well, why can't you contact the elves and get them to send help? You never know – one of the Elders might even know the old man's name. What do you think, Elzabet?"

"Mistress Ellie, please to be flattering me with a modicum of intelligence. I am doing this very thing ever since we are getting here, but it is not working for some reason."

Rats! Maybe it was because of the thick granite walls of the tower?

He nodded in agreement.

Out of idle curiosity, Ellie took the Elvenstone out of her pocket and sat there holding it. If they had time on their hands, then she might as well use it productively by getting the feel of the gem as Aelfric had suggested.

"Damn it!" Olson cursed, pacing up and down like a caged lion. "I am growing sick and tired of this place. And what I wouldn't give for a pipe of tobacco!"

"I didn't know you smoked," Gareth observed.

"I gave up some years ago – but at times like this, the awful craving comes back. No wonder they call it the Devil's Weed!"

Ellie suddenly remembered. She fumbled in her pocket and brought out the little silver box of snuff. "Here," she said.

"What is it?" Olson asked.

"It's snuff. It is being made out of fine powdered tobacco," Aelfric told him. "You are taking a pinch and sniffing it up your nostrils."

Olson had a go and before long he was having a fit of sneezing. "Ahhh-choo!"

"Thanks, but you can keep it," he said, thrusting the tiny box back in Ellie's hand. "Ahhh-choo! Ahhh-ahhh-choo! Oh, confound this wretched place!"

Ellie commiserated. "I don't like this any more than you do, Olson. Oh, I do wish we knew the old man's name."

Then she started. She could feel the stone glowing in her hand. But it wasn't clear blue any more nor fiery red, it was a vivid green. And she could hear someone in her head. It was Aelfric! Over and over again he kept saying something, but she couldn't quite make out what.

Ellie tried to picture him sitting there in front of the camp fire at Liliantha. That was no better.

She tried to picture herself as Aelfric himself; that the words were coming out of her own mouth.

And then she had it! He was saying ...

"The old man's name is Able!" she and Elzabet uttered in perfect unison.

Olson went to the door and banged on it with the hilt of his sword. "Old man!" he boomed, threatening to shake the very foundations of the tower. "You sorry excuse for a man! Get your ass up here this minute! You hear me?"

They heard someone scampering up the steps now and the hatch flipped open. "Yes? Whatcha want?" the old man grumbled.

Olson fixed him with his eyes and the old man began to quiver. "We know your name," he said with great satisfaction.

The old man clapped his hands over his ears. "I can't hear you! I can't hear you! I'm not listening! I can't hear what you're saying!"

"Able!" boomed Olson. "Open that wretched door – I command you!"

They heard the bolt being withdrawn and Olson heaved on the door, nearly wrenching it from its hinges.

"Everybody out!" he ordered and as they ran out he picked the old man up by the scruff of the neck and cast him into the cell.

"Hang on!" cried Ellie. "We should have found the next clue, shouldn't we? Let's not do anything hasty. Have we missed something out?"

Able's ears pricked up at this and he laughed out loud through his rotten teeth. "Well, well, well! The tables are turned! I've got something you're needing. And if you don't set me free, then you can't have it!" he lilted. "What do you say to that, eh? Cat gotcha tongue, has it?"

Growing red in the face, Olson strode across the cell and lifted the old man up by the throat until he was choking. "Give!" he demanded.

"Alright! Alright!"

Olson let him down and the old man stood there rubbing his neck. "No need to get yer hair off and yer knickers in a twist!"

Able fumbled in his pocket and tossed an oiled-leather package on the floor. Bethany bent down to pick it up.

Olson ushered Bethany out of the cell and bolted the door behind them.

"You're not going to leave Able in there, are you?" asked Bethany.

"I sure as hell am!" Olson snarled. They had never seen the man so angry before.

"But he'll die."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, that's what I say. He can rot in hell for all I care!" boomed Olson. "You hear me, old man?"

Olson pushed past them and strode down the steps two at a time.

"Don't worry, Mistress Bethany," said Elzabet. "I will be waiting a while so that the old man can be stewing in his own juices, and then am I telling the elves to be letting him free."

"Promise?"

"I am promising this thing," he nodded, and they shook on the deal.

17. The fortress

Olson had to make two journeys in the rowing boat this time to transport themselves and the two princes from the island, but at last they were safely back across the lake. Behind them they could still hear the baleful cries of the old man from the top of the tower.

The first thing Olson did when he got back was tend to his horse, Flash. It had been a good thing that he'd tethered the animal on a long lead within reach of the water's edge, or he might have died of starvation or thirst by now. And then he went to retrieve the provisions from the saddle-bags he'd stashed away in the bushes and they all ate a hearty meal.

The two princes couldn't thank them enough and Ellie was rather sorry to see them go, but they had a pressing engagement with their uncle at Beth-Galen. They promised to take news of the adventurers' progress back to the king.

At last, exchanging handshakes and hugs and showering the group with their profound thanks, the two princess bade them farewell and headed off to the north. So, it was in rather higher spirits that the merry band sat down to hear the next gripping instalment in their noble quest. Bethany performed the honours:

*Head t'ward the light
Of the rising sun
'Til you reach a ridge
And your climbing is all done.
Turn right by a stile
And go on straight
Following the cairns
'Til you find a gate.
Carry on down the lane
'Til you come upon a seat
And you find a mighty fortress
Where two rivers do meet.
You'll find me flying high
Fluttering in the breeze
I'll show you my true colours*

My next clue is a wheeze.

“We go east,” Olson decided. He seemed to be coming into his own now, thought Ellie; though she was a little worried by his recent angry outbursts.

Bethany took out her trusty compass and pointed off down a path to their left which cut across the valley through the trees and away from the lake.

They spent the rest of the morning climbing out of the valley following the dirt path as it zigzagged back and forth up the hillside.

At last they were beyond the tree-line and they scrambled up the last few yards to climb a stile over a dry-stone wall and stand atop a narrow ridge. So far, so good. Looking back they could see the lake down below and the island, and way off to the north they could make out the plain from which they'd come. They decided to stop a few minutes to take a breather. Well, they didn't decide to stop – rather, their aching legs and their heaving lungs decided for them.

“Where next?” asked Ellie, wiping away the beads of sweat forming in her hair-line. Boy, the sun was hotter than ever today and she was glad of the floppy black felt hat she'd brought along.

Bethany fished out the clue:

Turn right by a stile

And go on straight

Following the cairns

'Til you find a gate.

“What's a cairn?” Gareth wanted to know.

“It's a heap of rocks,” Bethany told him. “They're used to mark out a path.”

“Well, that sounds straightforward enough,” said Olson, and he was already off along the top of the ridge heading towards a cairn that he pointed out in the distance. “Come on, you lot,” he called back impatiently.

“Hmm,” huffed Gareth. “And I thought you were a slave-driver, Bethany!”

Fortunately, however, the string of cairns veered off to the left and they found themselves slowly descending over the other side of the ridge, back into the welcome canopy of the trees and out of the scorching midday sun.

They'd just about bottomed-out and were wondering where to go next when Olson spotted another dry-stone wall in a dip and a little further along to their right a heavy wooden gate. They went through the gate and came out onto a windy, rutted lane.

Bethany again consulted the parchment:

*Carry on down the lane
'Til you come upon a seat
And you find a mighty fortress
Where two rivers do meet.*

Olson looked both ways. It was debatable whether the land sloped down from their left or from their right. There was a wooden signpost on the far side of the road. The direction from which they'd emerged was marked "Striding Edge", whilst an arrow to the left read "Little Entwhistle" and one to the right read "Long Harbrough". There was no indication of distance.

"Any ideas?" Bethany asked.

"We'll try Little Entwhistle first," Olson decided, "and if necessary we'll double back."

Gareth didn't seem overly enthusiastic at that.

And then, as Ellie turned, she became aware that something was tugging at her. She had her hand in her pocket, holding the silk purse containing the Elvenstone. She turned toward the road to Little Entwhistle and walked up for two or three paces. There was a peculiar feeling in her legs – almost as if they were reluctant to go that way. Yet when she turned around and walked back toward Long Harbrough it almost felt as if some subtle force was gently pulling her along.

"No," she decided, and with a firmness that surprised them all, not least her: "Our quest lies in the direction of Long Harbrough."

Olson could have argued the toss, but he didn't. After all, if Ellie was wrong they could always double back. As far as Olson was concerned, it was a purely arbitrary choice. Elzabet didn't say anything. He didn't have to really. He merely looked at Ellie and smiled, and there was a twinkle in his eye as if he knew this was something to do with Ellie's increasing comfort with the Elvenstone.

So off they walked down the lane, and at length they could see the streets of a small town ahead, and they passed a roadside

bench, which was presumably the seat mentioned in the clue. More than that, though, they could see two rivers coursing across the plain. They passed either side of a headland and merged to flow through the town. And atop the headland, dominating the whole area, stood a mighty fortress.

Bethany confirmed their convictions:

*Carry on down the lane
'Til you come upon a seat
And you find a mighty fortress
Where two rivers do meet.*

“Well done,” Olson congratulated Ellie. “Tell me – did you really know, or was it just a lucky guess?”

“I’m not sure yet. I just had a tugging feeling, that’s all,” she answered truthfully.

Olson had a telescope with him and he took a closer look, then he breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re getting closer to the border with Azakstan now, and there have been worries that the skagrat hordes might strike north, but I see they still have the pennants of the Free Lands raised,” he explained. “Come, let’s get to the town before curfew. On reflection, it’s probably not safe to be abroad in this area.”

Ellie felt the stone inside her pocket and it did appear to be a little hotter than usual. “Yes, we should take care,” she agreed, exchanging glances with Elzabet.

When they came to the town and walked through the streets, Ellie had an uneasy feeling, in fact her stomach was quite queasy. At first, she had no idea why this should be, but she knew that something was not quite right. And then she suddenly realized: all the streets were deserted and the shops were boarded-up – not merely shut for the afternoon, but boarded-up.

Elzabet had noticed, too, and he quickened his pace. “Please to be making haste, my friends!” he implored them.

The stone was fiery-hot in Ellie’s pocket now and, snatching it up she stared right into its heart. She was shocked at its violent red hue.

Olson wanted to know what was going on.

“Big trouble,” she exclaimed.

The man leapt onto his horse and wheeled it around defensively, sword in hand.

Someone came dashing out of one of the houses to their left and caught sight of them. Elzabet had his bow ready in an instant. "Best get inside the castle sharpish!" the man yelled, pausing only to saddle his horse by the door.

"What's going on?" Bethany asked anxiously.

The man pointed to the skyline beyond the fortress. All along the ridges beyond, as far as the eye could see was what looked like a forest of lances, punctuated every now and again by the large structures of siege engines. Closer to they were raising a great war flag atop one of the towers to signal the dire nature of the situation.

Olson spurred his horse on and they broke into a run to keep up with him.

When they arrived at the fortress, the drawbridge had already been raised and soldiers were swarming all over the battlements.

It took Olson some time negotiating with the men in the gatehouse, but at last they summoned an officer and on his order they lowered the drawbridge just long enough to take the group and one other straggler over the moat to safety. There was a clinking of chains now and the heavy iron portcullis was lowered behind them. If there were any others still out there, perhaps in outlying farms and hamlets, it was just too bad.

As they entered the grounds of the castle they were met by a milling throng of anxious-looking people and their livestock, trying to find somewhere to camp in the grounds. A few tents had been set up near the keep, but for the bulk of the people it looked like they'd have to sleep rough wherever they could stake themselves a place – and there they'd have to stay for the duration.

"Move further into the grounds! Move on!" one of the guards was calling, and he used his lance to shepherd them away from the gate.

Olson wasn't going to be manhandled in this way. "You know who I am, soldier?"

"With respect, sir, even if you were the Grand Vizier, you can't stand here. Now move further into the grounds. There's plenty of room for everybody."

"My name is Captain Jezuel Olson of the Royal Guard, attached to the court of King Dorian."

The soldier was a little taken aback by that. So was Ellie, for that matter: she'd assumed that Olson was the man's first name.

"Where can I find your commanding officer?" Olson enquired.

With a smart salute, the soldier pointed over the heads of the crowd. "Most likely in the keep, Captain, sir."

"Thank you, soldier," Olson saluted in return, and he turned his horse and led the way.

"Make way in the name of the king!" he boomed and the crowd parted before him, so the group could worm their way through.

As they came to the keep, Olson had one of the soldiers stable his horse and they clambered up the long flight of stone steps to the stout doors into the building. At the top they found their way barred by two guards. "You can't come in here, mate. You'll have to camp in the grounds with the rest," one of the soldiers told him.

Again he pulled rank on them. "Captain Jezuel Olson of the Royal Guard," he introduced himself. "I wish to see your commanding officer."

The soldier looked at the others.

"And these people are with me," Olson said firmly. "Where I go, they go."

The men snapped to attention and saluted him, then one of them called inside to a sentry stationed inside. "Wells?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Escort the captain and his party to the C.O."

"Yes sergeant," came the reply and the man stepped forward out of the shadows. "If you'll follow me, sir ..."

The sentry led them in across the entrance hall, through a large banqueting hall and down a narrow corridor. He stopped in a doorway, drew a deep breath and knocked.

"Come."

The sentry went in and said something to someone inside the room, then ushered the group in.

They entered the room and crossed over the elegant rug on the floor. Ellie couldn't help but marvel at the exquisite design and at the work that must have gone into the manufacture of this masterpiece.

“You like it, my dear?” asked a portly figure rising from behind a huge rosewood desk at the far end of the room. He was resplendent in a smart dress uniform of red and gold and as he came over he twirled his long curly waxed moustache, which looked more like the horns of a bull.

“Came all the way from Zalzabil in the kingdom of Dungallan, or so I was led to believe by its former owner.”

“It's very beautiful,” she said in appreciation.

“And so it should be at the price.

“Cost me an arm and a leg, I'll tell you,” he laughed, and he waved a hook arm and tapped his metal leg. “Unto the victor the spoils, hey what?”

“Well, allow me to introduce myself to your charming company, Captain. I am General Andreas Zoot of the Seventh Army of the Free Lands.”

Olson stepped forward and introduced himself. “And these are my companions: Elzabet of the sylvan elves and Gareth, Bethany and Ellie from the realm of Sher Point.”

“I'm very glad to make your acquaintance,” the general said and he farted audibly as he said the words. “Sher Point, you say? Never heard of such a place.”

“It's a very distant realm,” Bethany told him, hoping that would be the end of the matter. “Way off to the north.”

The general signalled to the sentry to have some more chairs brought in. “Please, sit down and rest yourselves after your journey.”

He twirled the end of the moustache in his fingers. Then he said: “But we've charted all the land, even as far as the north and south poles,” he told them.

“Um ... It's a very secret place,” Bethany fibbed, thinking on her feet. “It's only a very small principality, tucked away in a series of hidden valleys in the heart of the mountains ... I expect your cartographers overlooked it.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I expect that would account for it,” he pondered and he farted again, more loudly this time. It was all the sentry could do to maintain a straight face.

Olson steered the conversation around to the subject of the war. “We heard that most of Azakstan had fallen to the south and that the goblin legions were perhaps massing to invade Pendravia

in the east, but we had no idea they were planning an attack in the south of the Free Lands.”

“They have taken Oriel and Purkin to the south,” the general said.

“Those are strategic garrison towns near the border with Azakstan,” Olson explained for the benefit of the others. “But this place – Long Harborough – I wasn't aware that the army had such a strong fortress here.”

“It was built secretly at the express wishes of the Guardians of the Secret,” the general told him.

So, was the general “in the Know” about such things?

“We have no direct contact with the Guardians,” the general said, anticipating her question. “But from time to time they send their representatives and ambassadors amongst us. We are happy to assist them with their Holy Work. We do not question their whims or their motives, for so often they have been proven right over the centuries and well worthy of our trust.”

Centuries? Heck, these mysterious folk sure worked to a long time frame.

“How long do you reckon you can last out here?” asked Olson.

“I would have thought months, if necessary,” said the general. “But having caught sight of the size of the enemy and of their siege weapons, I fear it might be only a matter of weeks, even days.”

“Time enough for help to arrive? I hear the king is raising a mighty army and that the elves and dwarves have sworn allegiance.”

“I hope so, but I fear that they will have more important commitments elsewhere, Captain. Our orders are simple: to hold out as long as we are able whilst the armies rally and consolidate their defences elsewhere. However, Captain, you are welcome to join us and take command of one of our companies of cavalry ...”

“... Well, that's very gracious of you, General ...”

“... In fact, I insist. Come, I'll have your companions fed and given rooms for the night while we go and introduce you to the men.”

And with that, the general gave orders to the sentry to pass on to the staff and, still farting profusely, he led a rather

disgruntled-looking Olson from the room.



The first attack came at dusk. The skagrats wheeled some kind of huge vehicle close to the moat. The contraption had a sturdy roof made out of logs cut from the woods nearby. It wasn't an offensive weapon, but it provided a safe corridor so that the skagrats could approach the moat with impunity. Arrows, spears and even rocks from the catapults on the battlements could not penetrate the machine.

Slowly but surely the skagrats brought boulders up in huge heavily-laden wagons and began to dump them in the moat. And once the moat was filled – as it would be eventually – they'd be able to bring up a battering ram to tackle the gates of the fortress.

At the same time, round the other side of the castle, the skagrats were bringing several of their own catapults to within striking distance of the walls.



Meanwhile, Ellie, Bethany, Gareth and Elzabet had been taken down to the kitchens and they were sitting at a table eating the stew that they'd been brought. Since his spell on stale bread and water in the tower, Gareth didn't appear quite as finicky as he had before and he was tucking in with relish.

“Any ideas about the last clue?” Bethany asked. They'd forgotten all about it in the heat of recent events.

“Remind me,” Ellie prompted.

“Right, gang. Now pay attention – this is it:”

You'll find me flying high

Fluttering in the breeze

I'll show you my true colours

My next clue is a wheeze.

“So what might be found flying high?” Bethany pondered.

“A bird?” suggested Elzabet.

“A kite?” said Ellie

The others didn't know what that was and she had to explain it.

There were no more takers for the time being.

“Well, I think we're on the right tracks, gang – but think about the rest of it: whatever it is, it's found flying high, it flutters in the breeze and it might have something to do with 'colours'.”

“A butterfly?” asked Gareth.

“I can only assume it's something we'd find in the fortress,” Bethany prompted.

Ellie tried to picture the fortress in her mind, though it didn't help much. “You think we should maybe have a look around?”

“Yes, okay.”

And so they finished off their meal, and Ellie went to wash their dishes.

“What are you doing that for?” asked Gareth. “Just leave them for the kitchen staff.”

“They've got enough on their plate, if you'll pardon the pun,” Ellie told him. “And the cook had to come in especially to warm this up for us. It's the least we can do, to my way of thinking.”

Anyhow, that done and differences of opinion aside, they left the kitchens and wandered up the stairs and through the corridors until they came to the entrance hall of the keep.

“Any ideas?” she asked as they stood there looking out on the sea of people setting up camp in the castle grounds.

“Let's have a walk along the battlements,” Bethany suggested, and so they headed for the nearest tower and climbed up the spiral staircase to emerge on the castle walls.

They had a look over the battlements and, catching sight of the army massed against them on the nearby hills, they were stunned. “The sooner we're away from this place the better, at least to my way of thinking,” she said to the others. She was no military strategist, but to her – if not to the others – it was not a matter of if the fortress fell so much as when.

And then Gareth caught sight of the huge flag of war fluttering in the wind atop the keep, bearing the coat of arms and the colours of the Free Lands.

So they rapidly backtracked and re-entered the keep to find a way up to the top. By the time they got up the spiral staircase to the battlements they were out of breath and they stood there for a time looking out over the field where the enemy was massed.

It wasn't long before Gareth found the package, tucked down in a crevice between the flag pole and a supporting wall, and he handed it to Bethany.

“Oy! You there!” someone called. A soldier, apparently posted there on lookout duty was approaching them and his sword

was drawn. "What are you lot doing up here, eh?"

"Lauri!" he called, and another soldier came over from the other side of the keep, clutching a pipe in his hand.

"Caught this lot!" the first soldier said. "Spying for the enemy most likely, or signalling to them."

"We have permission to be up here," Bethany protested as they were man-handled toward the stairway. "You ask Captain Olson."

"Olson? Never heard of him. Now down the steps before I run you through."

They had no choice in the matter but to comply with the soldiers' orders and they descended the steps and trudged through the warren of corridors until they came to General Zoot's office.

The soldier with the sword went in and they could hear him reporting his version of events to the C.O.. "Caught them up at the top of the keep spying on our forces and signalling to the enemy," the soldier told him adamantly.

"Thank you, Gruber – that will be all. Show the culprits in."

"If you're sure, sir ..."

"That will be all, Gruber. You may return to your station."

They were shown into the general's office at the point of a lance. "Thank you, Lauri – you're dismissed." The soldier saluted sloppily and left the room.

"So, said the general. "Now I don't believe Gruber's version of the story for one moment: he has a rather over-active imagination. But I do know that you must have been there with good reason. Indeed, you must be here at Long Harborough for some as yet undisclosed reason. People don't usually go wandering around the countryside willy-nilly in times of war.

"I think, perhaps, it's high time you came clean with me, don't you?"

And so yet again, and despite their privately-held reservations, the group told their story.

As Bethany brought the saga to a close, the general sat there agog. He went across to a cabinet and returned with a handful of glasses and a bottle. "I think this calls for a stiff drink," he decided for them.

Ellie was shocked.

"Don't worry, I'll water yours down, my friends," the general

laughed as he poured the drinks.

General Zoot resumed his seat. "Well, I must say your story is quite astonishing."

"Surely you believe us, don't you?"

"I was going to add that I would have thought it extraordinary had I not come across similarly extraordinary events and tales over the years. So yes, in short, I do believe you.

"On reflection, I think it would be prudent if you were to leave here as soon as is convenient. It would be a calamity of catastrophic proportions if you were to be captured here and if the Elvenstone were to fall into enemy hands.

"You'll forgive me if I am unable to provide you with an escort, as I need every able-bodied man in the defence of this fortress," the general continued. "Now, I had intended keeping Captain Olson here to command one of my cavalry companies, but – again on reflection – I can see that your need is greater than mine. Therefore, I shall release him from his obligations and return him to you. That much is only fair."

Well, Ellie was glad about that. "Thank you, General," she said.

Elzabet had been thinking, though. "Please to be begging your pardon, eminent General, sir, but how is we to be leaving this place when the fortress it is being besieged? They will be us to ribbons cutting."

The general had to think for a minute, too, whilst he deciphered Elzabet's peculiar grammar. "Ah," he said. "You'll be glad to know that this is something that the Guardians of the Secret have already anticipated. But more about that tomorrow. You must get a good night's sleep, for tomorrow you must be up early."



By night-time the assault on the moat near the gates had been repulsed. Burning balls of tar lobbed over the walls had finally set fire to the cover the skagrats had been using and they had beat a hasty retreat. And on the other side of the fortress the catapults had fallen silent. The walls of the fortress were made of the strongest stone and the rocks the catapults hurled at them had made little impact.

The general was not to be lulled into any false sense of

security, however. He knew full well that the enemy was only probing their defences and getting their measure. It was merely the opening gambit of what could be a long and drawn-out campaign – or indeed a short and painful one.

But down in the town the enemy was hard at work. They had already plundered the town and now it was burning from one end to the other. This had no strategic value, of course, other than causing a little attrition; but it was a tremendous, demoralizing, psychological blow to the soldiers and more so to the townspeople cooped up in the fortress.

And when they came across any stragglers who'd been left out in the cold or who had refused to leave their homes, the enemy erected crosses on the battlefield within sight of the walls and they nailed the townspeople to these crosses whilst still very much alive. In short, they crucified them and left them there to scream and ball and defecate, and die a very slow and painful death.



Morning came and they got washed and went down to breakfast in the kitchens. Olson was already there to greet them.

“Change of plan, apparently,” he told them, not realizing that they already knew. “The general thought I'd better go with you after all to offer you protection.”

Ellie wasn't sure whether she should be thankful on hearing that remark or resentful. She hated playing the dutiful little woman.

Bethany told Olson about finding another package near the flag on top of the keep.

“Really? You know, I noticed the flag on the way to the fortress, but I didn't think twice about it!” he laughed.

Then: “So what's it say?”

Bethany dutifully read it out loud:

*Ask the general
To let you leave unseen
And don't breathe a word
Of where you've been.
You'll find the treasure
In the heart of my lair
You'll know how to find me*

*By the taste in the air.
From there head east
Following the great river
'Til you come to a place
Dedicated to the giver*

“But how's that tie-in with whatever the general has in mind to get us away from here?” Ellie wondered. Trust in us, someone seemed to say in her head, but like Olson she dismissed the words as merely a concoction of her wishful thinking.

Olson shrugged. “I guess we'll have to wait and see – the siege puts a whole new complexion on things.”

After breakfast, the general called for them.

“Do you have a lantern with you?” he asked.

Elzabet pulled the storm lantern out from the bottom of his pack.

“Good,” the general said and he lit it. He walked across the room to lock the door into his office and took one of the flaming torches which hung on the walls. He gave it to Bethany to hold. “Follow me.”

General Zoot went across to a bookcase, pulled out a couple of the books and, taking out a very long silver key, he thrust it in the gap, turned the key and pulled on the bookcase. The whole section of wall swung inwards and, leading the way, he went inside and clomped down an almost interminable flight of steps. Indeed the Guardians of the Secret did appear to have thought of everything. Surely, this had to be the secret escape route mentioned in the verse?

The general came to rest at the bottom. “Well, this is where I must leave you, I'm afraid. Just keep following that passage over to your right and carry on until you find a flight of steps leading out. It'll take you well clear of the fortress.”

And with that, he took the flaming torch from Bethany and re-ascended the steps, farting so raucously that Ellie was worried he might burst into flames carrying the lit torch. High above them they heard the bookcase swing-to and then they were on their own.

18. Underground

Elzabet swung the storm lantern this way and that as they surveyed their surroundings. They were in a small chamber at the bottom of the long flight of steps. By the markings on the walls it looked like the chamber had been hewn by hand from solid rock.

There were several passageways leading from the chamber, but they took the general's advice and followed the one to the their immediate right. Not far ahead of them they could see light. But surely they hadn't gone nearly far enough: they must still be under the walls of the keep within the castle grounds? As they walked on, however, they noticed that the walls of the tunnel were no longer roughly hewn. They were in a natural cave system. And they noticed a far more astonishing thing and realized where the light was coming from. The rock walls and ceiling, even the floor, were radiating a faint yellow light. It wasn't much of a light but it was sufficient to allow them to find their way, and Elzabet turned out the storm lantern to conserve the oil. They stayed there for a while whilst their eyes became more accustomed to their dim surroundings, and then they moved on once more.

The group hadn't gone much further when they came to a fork in the road. One tunnel carried straight on, whilst the other veered off to the right. There were no directions or markings on the wall to guide them.

"Any ideas?" asked Olson, and he turned to Ellie. "Got any feelings about this?"

Ellie fumbled with the Elvenstone and pulled it from her pocket. It shone nearly as brightly as the storm lantern had now and flooded the area in a bright orange light.

"Well, I know one thing – I've just found another use for this ubiquitous gem," she smiled with satisfaction.

"That is good, I agree," said Olson, "but it doesn't answer my question."

Ellie took a few steps down the path that lay straight ahead, then retraced her steps and performed the same routine with the one that veered off to the right. She had felt no response. "I'm

sorry – I just don't know,” she said at last. “I have no feelings either one way or the other. And the clue gave no indications that we'd be faced by such a choice.”

Elzabet, however, seemed to have different ideas. He was darting about as if he were demented and he was sniffing the air with his long pointed nose.

“What on earth are you doing?” gasped Bethany.

“I is sniffing the air, Mistress Bethany,” he told her. And now he had begun licking his tongue out.

Ellie suddenly remembered what it had said in the clue:

*You'll find the treasure
In the heart of my lair
You'll know how to find me
By the taste in the air.*

So that was the way! She stepped into the passage straight ahead of her and she sniffed, but she could not sense anything out of the ordinary, neither smell nor taste. She went to the passage off to her right and she did the same, without result.

Elzabet, however, was tugging at her sleeve. “I am thinking we should be going down the passage to the right.”

Oh, well. Again, if they were wrong, they could always retrace their steps, Ellie supposed.

They'd travelled perhaps a hundred paces down the passageway when Ellie thought she could hear the sound of water. And within a minute or two they came upon an underground stream. It emerged from a hole in the rock to their left and, instead of washing over the floor of the passageway, it followed a deep channel which had been cut into the wall of the cave and ran alongside them.

Slowly but surely as they made their way down the passage the sound of the water become louder and louder until it became a thunder. And then ahead of them they could see the stream suddenly plunge down a great pothole in the floor of the passage amidst a cloud of spray.

“Hmm,” Olson grunted, edging closer to the edge of the great gulf in the floor. “Surely the general wouldn't have sent us this way?”

Ellie was beginning to have second thoughts, too.

Elzabet said nothing, but he was sniffing the air again.

“Begging your pardon, esteemed Captain Olson, sir, but I am still thinking we are the right way going.”

“Okay, Elzabet, let's say you are right. That still leaves us with the insurmountable problem – or perhaps that should be the unfathomable problem! – of where we go from here,” Olson laughed nervously.

“But that is quite simple, honourable Captain,” and Elzabet began rummaging in his bag. “We are to be going down the waterfall.”

“You have got to be out of your beady little mind!” Olson retorted.

Elzabet fastened the storm lantern to his pack and edged gingerly toward the slippery edge of the waterfall. Then, crouching down and bracing his foot against the wall of the cave, he took a long coil of rope and a hammer out of his pack and he began to hammer a long metal spike into a crevice in the tunnel floor. Then he threaded the end of the rope through a loop in the spike and tied the rope to it.

“I will be shouting you when I am down. When you is hearing my call, you will be coming down after me,” he requested. Then, taking the rope in both hands and leaning back against the rope to test the knot, he stepped over the edge of the waterfall and walked himself down into the misty gulf.

Ellie edged closer to the slippery edge of the waterfall to watch as Elzabet descended, but he was soon out of earshot. She realized then that they wouldn't be able to hear him call over the thunder of the waterfall.

“Is he down yet?” Olson yelled.

“I can't hear,” she called back. “I'm going down, all the same.”

She tugged on the end of the rope. It was heavy in her hands but not taut. “Yes, I think he must be down,” she said.

And, with her heart in her mouth, Ellie grasped hold of the rope, lent backwards and walked her way over the edge of the waterfall as Elzabet had demonstrated. The edge was slippery, though, and she lost her footing.

All of a sudden she found herself hanging from the rope with the full force of the water bearing down on her. But far worse than that was the tremendous shock. The water was unbelievably

cold. She was drenched to the skin and nithered to the bone within seconds. And she could hardly catch her breath with the water rushing over her face.

If she didn't move now, Ellie knew she'd die of hypothermia or pass out.

Pushing her legs against the slippery rock face, she almost ran down the rope, and then suddenly she found herself waist high in a pool of icy water dug out of a ledge in the rock face. But she was not down yet – she realized that she was still only half way down.

Almost with her last remaining energy, Ellie pulled herself out of the icy pool and pushed herself off again. Running on little more than adrenalin, she came down the remaining hundred feet. Then the rope ended and she was flying through the air to land in another deep pool at the bottom.

Elzabet ran forward, waded into the pool and pulled her out.

“Oh, thank God,” she cried. She was safely down. They were in a small cavern looking up a high chimney. The waterfall was so high that she couldn't even see the ledge half-way up, let alone the top.

Then she turned to Elzabet, and yelled at him between chattering teeth, over the thunder of the waterfall: “If I'd known that the waterfall was that c-c-cold or that it had been s-s-so high, I w-w-wouldn't have c-c-come down!”

Jeez! Her whole body was shaking now. And suddenly she thought of poor old Bethany. Olson and Gareth had sufficient blubber on them to insulate them against the cold, but Bethany? She was so frail compared to the rest of them.

Fortunately, however, they all made it down and Ellie was relieved to find that the others had fared better than she had. They'd managed to avoid the pool half way up and had abseiled down the side of the waterfall, away from the main thrust of the water, so they were not nearly as cold and wet as she was.

Elzabet seemed quite concerned about Ellie and he hurried them off across the cavern, sniffing the air as he went.

“Is it j-j-just me, or is it getting w-w-warmer down here?” Ellie asked him as they crawled through a low tunnel at the far end of the cavern. And then she smelt it, too. There was a very definite, sulphurous smell hanging in the air and Ellie was left

with a bitter after-taste in her mouth. She knew then that they had been destined to come this way:

*You'll find the treasure
In the heart of my lair
You'll know how to find me
By the taste in the air.*

They came out of the crawl and found themselves in a huge cavern, dimly lit by the faint glow of the rocks. Huge stalactites hung down from the vaulted ceiling and stalagmites reached up from the floor. In places, the two met to form monumental columns.

She laughed. "You know how you c-c-can tell which is which? Well I r-r-remember my father saying that 'Mites run up and tights come down!'" But for some reason Elzabet didn't seem in the mood for joking.

The whole cavern wreaked of the sulphurous fumes and Ellie's heart leapt as she was hit by what she could only describe as a primeval fear.

Elzabet had sensed it, too, and he looked anxiously towards the others. "Dragon," he hissed between his teeth.

Staying close together, they edged across the cavern, skirting along the walls in what little shadow was afforded by the forest of stalagmites.

Near the centre of the vast cavern they saw a high pile of fallen boulders and, nestling beside it, a huge pile of treasure. But what really took their attention – and made them quake in their boots – was a huge red dragon curled up beside the heap. The creature appeared to be asleep and every time it breathed out, it sent out long tongues of flame and plumes of acrid smoke from its nostrils.

The group crept closer and clambered nervously up the fallen boulders to look down on the scene. They gasped at the astonishing wealth of treasure that the dragon guarded. There were golden candlesticks, plates and goblets; chests full of coins and fabulous gems of every size and hue. There were rubies and sapphires the size of eggs; long, multi-tiered diamond necklaces, and pearls by the score. Such a treasure horde would keep a small town full of people in luxury for the rest of their lives, even for generations.

But greatest of all, by far, was the gem that stood in pride of place not far from the dragon's long snout. It shone bright scarlet and far more brightly than all the rest combined. Ellie recognized the stone immediately – it was the third fragment of the fabulous Elvenstone.

Clambering up to take a look, Olson dislodged a small boulder and the creature stirred. Long streams of flame erupted from its nostrils as it breathed out with a great sigh, lighting up the whole cavern and making it almost unbearably hot. They huddled down behind the rocks as the dragon reared its head and peered around through fiery-red eyes, then it settled down once more and they could relax a little.

Olson scanned each of them in turn and in that instant, Ellie knew that he was looking for a volunteer. The fragment of the Elvenstone lay tantalizingly close.

“Anyone fancy creeping down there to get the stone?” he asked, confirming her worst fears.

Again the creature stirred, perhaps hearing Olson speak and again it reared its head and looked around. But this time it did not go back to sleep. Instead it rose ungainly to its feet and shot huge plumes of flame into the air to light up its lair, and its eyes searched every corner of the vast cavern. Fortunately, however – if dragons had thoughts at all – it did not think to check the pile of fallen boulders beside the great horde of treasures.

Needless to say, there were no immediate takers for Olson's kind offer. And Ellie couldn't help but remind herself of what her father had once told her – that the sign of a good officer was that he would never ask his men to do anything that he wasn't himself prepared to go through with.

Perhaps these same thoughts were running through Olson's mind for, keeping low, he had slipped the heavy saddle-bags off his shoulders and he was creeping closer to the edge of the boulders to peer over. The dragon's head could be no more than twenty feet away. The creature was snoring – and every time it exhaled, it shot a stream of flames across the cavern from its fiery nostrils.

Ellie clutched the Elvenstone tightly in her hands, hoping and praying for divine inspiration; but, alas, none was forthcoming.

Shielding his eyes from the intense heat, Olson got slowly to

his feet and began to clamber tentatively down from the pile of boulders. With each step he took, the man paused, being especially careful not to dislodge any loose rocks on the way down. He was scarcely ten feet from the creature's head now.

Suddenly the dragon's eyes flashed open and it peered around once more, sending out tongues of flame and a huge column of acrid black smoke. Then it spotted Olson standing there and it turned its great head towards him. Taking fright, he jumped from the pile of boulders and ran full pelt into the forest of stalagmites to their left.

The creature got up on its feet and shot an angry flame across the cavern and Olson cowered down behind the columns. The dragon had him penned-in and it was only a matter of time before Olson met his Maker.

The third piece of the Elvenstone stood unguarded now and so tantalizingly close. Ellie knew that given Olson's diversion, she could easily have stolen down and picked it up. But no, she could not do that.

“Over here!” Ellie yelled, and she took the Elvenstone in her hands and held it before her. It shone more brilliantly than ever now. The dragon turned its head, and for a moment it faltered. Then it turned, whipping its tail angrily and bringing one of the immense petrified columns crashing to the ground.

In that instant, Olson saw his chance and he made a run for it, circling right round the cavern and out of harm's way – for the moment, at least. But the dragon's attention now turned to Ellie who stood vulnerable and exposed atop the pile of fallen boulders.

Angry flames erupted from the creature's mouth and licked over her head as she dived for cover. And now the dragon was advancing on the group. The others scurried away out of range, but Ellie was stuck there, her foot caught painfully in a crevice between the rocks. Time almost seemed to stand still now – perhaps this was because she was thinking so fast? – and everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

There had to be some way to stop this creature.

Across the cavern, Olson had seen Ellie's plight and he rushed back over, wielding his sword high above his head and brought it crashing down on the dragon's flank. But the creature

had heavily-armoured scales and the blow caused little more than a flesh-wound. Still, it did distract the dragon's attention for a time, and in that time Elzabet was scrambling over the rocks toward her and was couching down beside her, trying his level best to free her trapped foot.

Again the dragon shot a fiery ball of fire at Olson. It missed him by inches and set the plume of his helmet alight, forcing him to beat a hasty retreat. Then its attention went back to Ellie and it turned and began to advance once more.

Gareth was yelling and screaming at the dragon from the other side now, trying to attract its attention, but the creature paid him little heed and flicked its tail disdainfully in his general direction. The blow caught him behind his knees and he was bowled over and landed on his back, squealing in agony and clutching his backside.

Then Olson was at the dragon again, climbing on the dragon's back and trying to thrust his sword between the dragon's scales. The creature turned its head and shook itself, doing its best to unseat him; but he held on, distracting the dragon just long enough for her to pull her leg free and get out of the line of fire.

If only there was a way to snuff out the creature's flames, then they'd be in with a chance, thought Ellie. She thought about all the water back at the waterfall – but they had no bucket. What about her waterproof pack? She scrambled down from the rocks and tipped out the contents on the ground and she was just about to make a dash for it when her eyes lit on the little silver snuff box.

That was it! “Oh, Destiny, I love you!” she screamed and she scrambled madly up the fallen boulders. The dragon was still doing its best to unseat Olson, who hung onto its neck for grim death. It turned its head, trying to catch him with a lick of fire from its nostrils and it could not be more than four feet from Ellie.

She tipped the contents of the snuff box in her hand. So much snuff from such a small box, she wondered? Soon she had a handful – and still there was more coming out. The box was enchanted!

Ellie let out a great yell and in the instant that the dragon turned its head she had thrown the great handful of snuff and was

jumping from the pile of boulders. She landed with a crash amidst the treasure horde and rolled away just as the dragon let out another ball of fire.

Suddenly the creature began to writhe about and make the strangest noise she had ever heard.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-choo! A-a-a-choo! A-choo!” the dragon began to sneeze, almost deafening them and, as it did so, its great flame was blown out and it stood there sneezing and belching out voluminous clouds of acrid smoke from its nostrils. Its flame had been well and truly snuffed.

Ellie looked anxiously about her. She'd landed right on top of the heap of treasure and there were glittering stones everywhere. But then she spotted it – none of them outshone the precious piece of the Elvenstone. She reached across and snatched it up and hared across the cavern, calling out to the others to follow here. “I've got it! I've got it!” she yelled and the others came running after her.

“Where now?”

They all looked around them and then they saw light streaming in through an opening at the far end of the vast cavern.

They could hear the dragon behind them now, still sneezing away, but they didn't stop or look back, they carried on running. And finally they were out in the open air. Out of breath, they flopped down in the long grass and lay there for a time, very thankful indeed to still be alive. The only disappointment was for Olson, as he'd had to leave his beloved horse behind at the fortress.

*You'll find the treasure
In the heart of my lair
You'll know how to find me
By the taste in the air.*

Indeed they had – and it had very nearly been the taste of their own fried bacon!

19. The rakes

They had the third piece of the Elvenstone now and for that they were eternally grateful. It was just a pity that they couldn't have scooped up some of the fabulous wealth of the other treasures in there before they'd made their escape.

"We could always come back, when the quest is over," Bethany suggested.

Gareth smiled. "Aye, we could at that."

Olson got to his feet. "We must be very careful from now on," he urged them. "I don't know where the cave system has brought us out. For all we know, we might be behind enemy lines."

He scratched his head. "Listen, I want you all to stay here until I get back. You see that hill over there? That should give a good view of the land around. I'm going to have a reconnoitre. If I'm not back by sunset, then you'll know something's wrong. Camp here for the night, and if I'm not back by dawn ... well ... you must go on alone."

Then, leaving his saddle-bags with them for safe-keeping, Olson was away into the trees.

When Olson had gone, Ellie took the Elvenstone from her pocket. The others crowded round eagerly. She took the fragment and held it close, trying to figure out the correct alignment.

She gasped as the fragment leapt out of her fingers and connected. It fused with the large piece. It was as if the two fragments had a powerful magnetic attraction – or some other strange affinity.

The crystal shone even brighter than ever now and, though it still had a reddish hue which meant that they were not entirely safe, at least it was not so hot and it had lost its alarming scarlet glow.

The sun was high in the sky now and beating down on them and Ellie had begun to dry out, so her worries of hypothermia were behind her. But as for Gareth, he'd taken quite a tumble when the dragon had lashed out at him with its tail, and he was still nursing his bruises. She hoped that he hadn't damaged his

spine.

And then she had an idea – actually it was more like a prompting and an urge. She went over to Gareth.

“Roll over on your tummy,” she requested.

“Why?”

“Just be a darling and humour me, will you?” she asked and, though rather bewildered, he obliged.

Ellie held the Elvenstone in her right hand and she brought it ever so slowly down his spine, close to the skin but not quite touching.

“Hey, that feels warm,” he chirped-up.

Gradually, Ellie brought the crystal down to the base of his spine.

“Yeah, that's it!” he told her. “Hold it right there.”

So she held the Elvenstone over the area for a minute or two and then she took it away.

“Okay, you can get up now. How's that feel?”

Gareth got to his feet and wiggled his backside. “Great!” he enthused. “How did you do that?”

“The Elvenstone has curative powers,” she explained, putting the stone away.

“Wonders will never be ceasing, Mistress Ellie!” Elzabet whooped. “You is really the hang of the Elvenstone getting!” That was certainly more than could be said for the sylvan elf's grammar.

All afternoon the group waited for Olson's return. They were chomping at the bit, raring to go, and more than a little bit disgruntled that they had to stay there twiddling their thumbs at Olson's behest. By sunset in the early evening, however, they were beginning to get worried and their former grumblings had subsided.

The adventurers had just eaten and they were sitting around the camp-fire toasting their toes before settling down for the night, when they heard a horse whinny close-by.

Gareth was up on his feet in a flash, waving his sword about. Elzabet held him back. “It is only the honourable Captain Olson,” he told him.

Just then, Olson came into view, leading a horse by the reins.

“Sorry I've been so long,” he greeted them, tying the chestnut

mare to a nearby tree. "I had a bit of a run-in with the skagrats and relieved them of one of their horses."

"Are we safe here?" Gareth wanted to know.

"I think so. We're a good way east of Long Harborough and the enemy are camped closer to the west and to the south."

Olson looked at their empty plates. "Ah, I see you've eaten already."

Elzabet went to the fire and replaced the metal cooking pot on the embers. "We are saving you food," he said. "It will not be taking long to be warming it for you."

Ellie didn't even notice herself falling asleep by the fire until she awoke early the next morning. Olson was going round the group, shaking them roughly. "Come on, you idle lot, stir your stumps!" he called, and as they woke up he did the rounds with tin cups of revitalizing herbal tea.

He was anxious for them to be off and was busily cooking them a quick breakfast whilst they came to their senses. There was no water close at-hand, so they had to go without a wash. Mind you, after the previous day's soaking under the waterfall, they didn't really need one.

"Where next, Bethany? You're the boss," Olson asked as they began to clear their pots away.

"Um? East, I believe, following the river."

"Well, look lively there. It's time we were off." Olson was certainly in bullish mode that morning, Ellie mused as they shouldered their packs. They set off at a fair lick to keep up with the man.

Soon enough, with a little help from Olson who'd been out surveying the land, they found the river and they set off down a riverside track.

"Any idea how far?" Olson asked Bethany.

"No, sorry. The clue simply states that we're to follow this track until we come to some place 'dedicated to the giver', whatever that's supposed to mean."

"Okay, men, keep your eyes peeled," the man said, and he spurred his horse on up a rise off the beaten track to scout around.

Just then Ellie felt the Elvenstone suddenly grow hot and start throbbing in her pocket.

She saw something large and menacing looming in her vision

and dived to the ground instinctively – or rather it felt as if someone or something unseen had thrown her down.

Bethany pulled Ellie to her feet and Ellie just had time to catch sight of a giant winged creature flapping away over the trees.

But now there were more of the beasts crossing the river and flying straight toward them.

“Into the trees!” Elzabet cried and, catching hold of Ellie by the arm, he ran full pelt off the track and across a field. The field had been recently ploughed and was heavily furrowed, making it hard going underfoot.

“What are they?” asked Bethany breathlessly.

“Rakes,” Elzabet told her.

The creatures were not far away now and they were swooping down towards them. Gareth stumbled and fell on his face in the soil.

Just as one of them was extending its claws, ready to fall on Gareth and rip him limb from limb, Olson spurred his horse on across the field screaming something at the top of his voice. “Ay-akee Ulrako! Ay-akee Ungo!”

As the rake landed and flapped toward Gareth, Olson reached it and, striking it across the neck, he severed the beast's ugly head with a single blow. It stood there for a moment, arterial blood spurting from its neck, then fell over and lay there quivering.

Ellie ran back and pulled Gareth to his feet and together they ran under the protective canopy of the trees. As they did, the remaining rakes descended in the field and began to fight over the dead carcass.

Gareth looked quite shocked by the experience. “It's okay, we're safe,” Ellie reassured him.

Olson shook his head. “They know we're here, and before long every skagrat in the area will know it. We must press on.”

The group trudged along by the edge of the field some distance until they were clear of the rakes, then they crossed tentatively back across the furrowed earth to the track.

They hadn't gone far when the track led them away from an area of swampy ground covered with reed beds. There was a group of houses nearby, just about sufficient to warrant the title of hamlet, and they came upon a party of men in dark robes and

bearing staffs, some standing and some kneeling by the wayside.

Gareth didn't like the look of these men and he said as much to Olson. The pair of them had their swords at the ready as they cautiously approached.

"It is being alright," Elzabet pronounced. "These are holy men, come to be paying their respects to God at a roadside shrine."

Gareth and Olson put away their swords and Olson leapt down from his horse and went over to talk to the monks. It was to be hoped that this was not an Order vowed to silence.

"Good afternoon," said Olson.

"May the Peace of God be with you," added Ellie. That sounded like the sort of thing you should say in greeting to men of God.

"And may God be with you," said one of the hooded figures, turning their way.

"Have you come far?" Olson enquired.

"From our monastery near Morton to the south," the man said. "The town has been ransacked by the skagrat hordes. Thanks be to God we escaped unharmed, though a number of our younger fellows chose to stay and fight to the death."

"And where are you going?"

"We are following the Way of the Crosses toward Long Harborough," said the man and he pointed to the ancient cross propped up against the shrine. Apparently the crosses marked out the route in the same way that cairns were used elsewhere.

Olson gave the man the bad news: "Long Harborough is under siege and it's likely that it will fall before you reach it, old man."

The monk looked downcast.

"It would be better if you were to pass Long Harborough to the east, then travel north for a few leagues until you're well clear of the town before cutting back to the west. Ard-Balin is your best hope, or the city of Beth-Galen."

The monk bowed. "Thank you, sir, and may God be with you. I will see that my people do that." And with that he returned to the shrine and knelt to pray with the others.

It was only when they'd wandered on some distance that Elzabet was suddenly struck by an idea. "Please to be reading the

last clue out again, Mistress Bethany.”

She duly obliged:

*From there head east
Following the great river
“Til you come to a place
Dedicated to the giver*

“Do you have anything in mind, Elzabet?”

“Indeed to goodness, I do. I am thinking that this 'Giver' is being God and that this place it is being a shrine.”

Well I never!

The group waited until the monks had moved on and then they retraced their steps.

All manner of objects had been left at the shrine as offerings. There were fruit and vegetables – some of which had begun to decompose – and there were little pieces of cloth with messages like “God bless Alzabar”, “Make me rich” and such-like. And, lo! and behold! there was a small oiled-leather package.

“Is not God great?” Elzabet cried in ecstasy.

20. The pace quickens

Bethany opened the package and read out the clue:

*If you wish to find out
What next to do
Go and see the widow
At number twenty two.*

Well, you couldn't get much more straightforward than that. They wandered across the road to have a closer look at the house numbers. And here it was, number two, Main Street – in fact the only street – in Othingham.

They opened the garden gate and walked up to the house. Olson rapped loudly and officiously on the door. There was no reply, although Ellie did notice the curtains twitching next door. He knocked again, even louder now.

The door opened at number twenty and a little old lady stepped out onto the doorstep. “Looking for Mrs McGuffin are you, my love?”

“Um ... we're looking for the widow who lives here.”

“Yes, that'll be Mollie. You'll find her out back, my love. She's a little hard of hearing.”

They thanked the woman and walked round the side of the house and into the back garden. There was a fence at the bottom of the garden and an open gate and Mrs McGuffin was in the paddock beyond, feeding some ponies.

“Hello? Mrs McGuffin?” called Bethany, and the woman finished what she was doing, turned and walked toward them, shutting the gate behind her. She suddenly jumped. “Ooh! I didn't see you there – you gave me such a fright!”

The woman pulled herself together. “Can I help you? What do you want?”

Bethany appeared utterly nonplussed. Presumably, she'd expected the woman to know what she was there for. But, of course, the woman wasn't a mind-reader, at least not as far as Ellie knew.

Bethany just stood there. “Um ... er ... well ...” she said, and the more she tried to get the words out, the worse it got.

Ellie thought fast. "We're here on a quest," she said.

The woman merely frowned.

"Um ... that's right," took up Bethany. "We're on a treasure hunt."

There was an embarrassing silence.

"We're ... here about the ponies. Are they yours?" said Ellie. She couldn't think of what else to say.

"Oh, I see!" the woman said at last. "Why didn't you say that in the first place, instead of going on about quests and treasure hunts. Do I look like I'm the sort to have treasure stashed away under my mattress? And, no, these ponies aren't mine, I'm just looking after them for a friend."

"Ah ... so they're not for sale?" asked Ellie.

"Not for sale as such," the woman replied. "I've been given instructions that they should be given to whoever could answer two riddles. Funny state of affairs, if you ask me, but ours not to reason why ..."

"I think that's us," said Bethany.

The woman looked at her. "Well, that's as maybe. There've been others, you know, and they couldn't answer."

Others?

Then: "You'd better come inside. I don't suppose you'd say 'no' to a beaker of lemonade and a biscuit?"

They had no objections to that and they followed the woman inside and sat down wherever they could in the cramped living room.

Mrs McGuffin went into the kitchen and returned with a jug, some beakers and a biscuit barrel and whilst they were helping themselves she was rooting through her handbag and drawers for the riddles. "Ah, here it is. I knew I'd put it somewhere for safekeeping, but I couldn't think where. Things like that happen when you get older," she laughed. "Forget my head sometimes, if it wasn't screwed on!"

"Ready?" she asked, putting on her reading spectacles. They nodded.

"Here we go then:

A man walked south for ten leagues; turned and walked west for ten leagues; then turned and walked another ten leagues north. And when he'd finished, he found himself back in the

exactly the place he'd first started ...

... Where was he?

"But that's ridiculous!" protested Olson, furrowing his brow.

Gareth was still mentally drawing the route in the air with his finger. "But he'd be ten leagues east of where he started, surely?"

Olson shook his head in despair.

But Bethany was thinking, as she did: "I know!" she gasped. "The North Pole!"

"Oh, phooey!" The woman seemed quite put out that she'd worked out the answer so soon, as if the girl had spoilt all the fun.

"Very well, then:

A man married his own sister without breaking the law. How was this?

Olson kept quiet this time, presumably so that he wasn't shown up by Bethany's mental dexterity.

"Well?" asked the woman, helping herself to another of the biscuits and passing the barrel round.

Again, Bethany's eyes lit up: "The man was a priest!" she chortled.

And again the woman seemed more than a little surprised.

"Well, I must say, your friend here is as bright as a buttercup! I've lost count of the folk who've been flummoxed by the riddles. So-called intelligent, grown men, too," she beamed at last, nodding in Olson's direction and rising to her feet. "Anyhow, the ponies are out in the paddock. Now, you'll be wanting saddles, no doubt ... I have them in the garden shed ..."

Ellie could see it coming. "How much?" she asked, getting her purse out.

"Oh, I think a couple of Nobles should just about cover it," the woman replied, almost snatching the coins from Ellie's hand.

"And then, of course ... there's the matter of the next clue ..."

Ellie could see that Olson was debating whether to take matters into his own hands, but she came between them. "Well?" she enquired.

"Well, it's not easy making a living with your husband dead and your children all grown up and moved away ... It's a hard life ..."

"Which means," Ellie asked, trying to control her own

temper.

“I was thinking it might be worth another three ...” the woman said tentatively, her eyes nearly popping out of her head at the sight of so much gold.

Ellie paid up without further question. There was a higher Justice at work and things would balance the accounts in the end – that was Ellie's belief.

The woman spent some time rummaging around in her handbag and drawers. For a few moments, Ellie began to worry that the woman might have permanently mislaid the precious parchment, but at last she found it and handed it over.

And after gathering the ponies together and saddling them up, and quite a while disputing over who should have which mount, they all gathered round to look at the latest clue.

Bethany read it out to them:

My friends, there is

No time to waste

So make for Duvallen

With all due haste!

You'll find me running a little slow

Down at the Cow and Gate

I am somewhat behind the times

So drink up now, it's late.

“Well, it looks like we'd better be off,” said Bethany, climbing into the saddle. “Any idea where Duvallen is?”

Olson shrugged. “I think it's in the east, not far from the border with Pendravia.”

They headed down the road to the east anyway and coming to a crossroads they saw a faded wooden sign. “Yes,” Gareth confirmed. “We're on the right road.”

Now this was more like it, thought Ellie. She gave the pony a little flick and it broke into a canter and the others followed suit. They rode for about three hours without seeing another soul on the way. It was late afternoon by now and as soon as they found a suitable place they decided to have a rest and water the animals at the river's edge.

Ellie climbed off her pony and had a wander around to stretch her legs. She'd only ever ridden a horse a couple of times before and her backside and the inside of her legs were aching.

She'd hoped they might stop for a bite to eat, but apparently not – Olson was back in the saddle and calling for them to be on their way. He wasn't sure how far Duvallen was, but he said that he'd rather they made it before sunset than have to camp out overnight.

As they set off, Elzabet caught sight of a plume of dust further back on the track. “Riders!” he warned them.

Olson had his telescope out and he watched them as they approached. Satisfied, he folded the telescope up and returned it to his pocket. “It's only Free Landers,” he told them.

As they got closer, however, they could see that the horses were travelling at a frightening lick and Ellie remained apprehensive. She checked the stone to be on the safe side. It signalled no compelling danger, so she relaxed and continued to canter her horse down the track.

They could hear a thunder of hooves now and they drew their mounts to one side to let the riders pass. Then the riders slackened their pace and drew alongside.

“How goes it?” asked Olson. The riders could no doubt see by his helmet and bearing that he was an officer.

“Trouble, sir. Big trouble. The fortress at Long Harborough has fallen.”

“But how can that be?” asked Ellie. She was about to say that they were there only a few hours ago but thought better of it as she had no easy way of explaining how they'd escaped the siege.

“The skagrats found a way into the keep. They disposed of the general and the guards there, then they donned the men's uniforms and managed to sneak into the gatehouse. They were discovered not long after, but the damage was done – they'd lowered the drawbridge and they were able to hold the gatehouse long enough for the skagrat cavalry to enter the grounds. And after the cavalry came the foot soldiers ... We got away and we're heading for Duvallen to warn them. We couldn't make it north – there were too many skagrats around.”

“But what's become of the people there?” Ellie wanted to know.

“It depends. I expect most were slaughtered on the spot. Others – the able-bodied – will no doubt be sold into slavery, Miss.”

Ellie was horrified, and she couldn't help but think that the

skagrats had gained entrance to the fortress via the cave system. And, if so, the skagrats might have used the rope they'd had to leave behind. Without that, they'd never have been able to climb the waterfall.

Elzabet shook his head and clutched her hand, and even though his lips didn't move, she could hear him telling her that it wasn't their fault and that she shouldn't get angry with herself about it. But she could also tell that he, too, was concerned that the skagrats should have stumbled on the secret caves in this way. Something just wasn't right.

Elzabet nodded.

"Anyway," said one of the riders, "We must be on our way," and with a flick of their whips, the riders were away, kicking up the dust as they went.

"Come on," Olson said, and digging his spurred heels in he was cantering after the riders with the others following along behind. "We can't hope to keep up with those men, but I still aim to reach Duvallen by nightfall. Perhaps before that town falls, as well, judging by the pace at which the war is progressing."



Olson was still going strong by the time they reached Duvallen, though the ponies were becoming tired and their riders more than a little fractious.

"Only just in time," said the sentry at the gate into the town, consulting his pocket watch and letting them through and, despite the fact that they'd seen others coming up the road behind them on foot, the man swung the gate firmly shut behind him and securely bolted it. "More 'an me job's worth to keep the gates open past sunset," he told them. "My governor's a real stickler when it comes to rules and regs."

They reached the main street inside the town walls and Ellie clambered stiffly down from her mount and walked the animal the rest of the way. The animal was snorting and there were clouds of steam rising from it. As for Ellie, she was in agony. It felt as if someone had given her a good stiff kick up the backside.

As they passed the rows of shops, Olson were already on the lookout for the Cow and Gate. Bethany, who was a little envious that Ellie should have a hat to protect her head had stopped outside a hat shop and she was admiring the latest styles. She was

particularly taken by a slightly pointed hat with a wide brim and a big peacock feather for decoration.

“What do you think?” Bethany asked her, but Ellie had other things on her mind, like where to get a nice warm bath to ease her creaking bones, or some ointment to soothe her aching muscles. She saw some horse liniment on sale at a farrier's and she read the label on the bottle: “an effective embrocation for relieving muscular stiffness.” Now that sounded like it would do the trick. As for Elzabet and Gareth, they were standing enthralled in front of the window of a shop boasting all kind of accoutrements pertaining to the magical arts.

“Come on, no dawdling there!” snapped Olson, turning his head to find them lagging behind.

At last Olson spotted the painted sign outside the Cow and Gate and they walked the horse and ponies through the archway into the courtyard. Meanwhile, Olson went inside to see if the landlord had any stalls free in the stables.

Having stabled the animals, they went inside, along a corridor and into the bar. The doorways in the inn were quite low and more than once Olson, who was a good deal taller than they were, had to duck to avoid banging his head on the old oak beams. There were a large number of soldiers billeted in the town and they were taking up most of the tables, singing bawdy songs. The landlord had them shift round and found the group a table and stools in a snug, set into the bow window looking out on the main street.

Ellie heard the old grandfather clock across the room chiming on the hour and she checked her pocket watch. It was just coming up to nine o'clock.

“Yes, my friends?” asked the landlord, hovering over them.

“What time do you close, landlord?” Olson asked.

“Officially, I lock the doors at ten o'clock, squire, but if you're staying the night ... well, I'll be keeping the bar open a little later for the regulars. Need I say more?”

“Thank you, and do you have any food on?” asked Olson.

“I'm afraid we've stopped serving hot meals, squire,” said the man: “To tell the truth, all these squaddies have eaten the pantry bare. But I'm sure I can rustle up some bread and cheese for you or some cold ham.”

Bethany settled for the cheese. "And do you have chutney?" she asked.

"We most certainly do, my dear."

"I'll have the ham, please," said Gareth. "With sweetcorn relish."

"Oh, I'm sorry, lad, but we're fresh out of relish."

"Ah ..." Gareth looked a little put out by that.

The others settled for the ham without complaint. They could always get a decent meal the next day.

"And something to drink, squire?"

"Two tankards of ale, please, and lemonade for the youngsters," requested Olson.

"Certainly, squire," said the landlord with a little bow, and he went off behind the bar to sort out their order.

Gareth was quite engrossed by the soldiers' songs and Ellie could not help but overhear. Some of the songs were melodic and romantic, but others were quite lewd. How could she put it delicately? They concerned the men's prowess. And still other long ballads spoke of the great victories, of the errantry of certain inexperienced and disparaged officers, and of the treacheries of the past, not least through the First Great War.

But Olson was far more interested in the soldiers' conversations, and she could see him straining to hear. They were talking heatedly about the situation in Pendravia, a realm which lay to the east. It seemed that many of the soldiers were due to be sent to reinforce Mithil-Gor across the border, in the south of Pendravia.

"They say the goblin legions have taken towns in the north," one of the soldiers was saying.

"Aye, and if they strike westwards we might lose Glen-Dun."

"Nah," said another. "Most likely they'll head south and take Mithil-Gor, so they can join up with the skagrats." And the man spat a great glob of phlegm on the sawdusted floor as he said that name.

"Hah! If only they knew how weak and vulnerable they are at Mithil-Gor, the Dark Forces would take it, instead of pussy-footing around."

Well, it was a good job her crew weren't spies for the Dark Forces, Ellie pondered. Didn't the fools know the old adage about

walls having ears?

“What time do you have?” asked Olson.

Ellie looked at her pocket watch. “It’s coming up to ten.”

“Last drink before closing? We’ll have to be up early in the morning. I’ve told the landlord to wake us for breakfast at six.”

“Yes, why not?” she said, and went back to eavesdropping on the soldiers’ conversations.

“Arni says that goblins eat babies, you know. Disagreeable creatures!”

Disagreeable? That was something of an understatement, wasn’t it? But as for eating babies, there wasn’t an enemy throughout the annals of history that hadn’t been accused of one such atrocity or another. Which was not to say that they didn’t really rape, butcher and pillage.

“Old Rich has seen their handiwork,” his mate said. “He told me the goblins chop off the heads of their victims. Then they peel off the skin and pickle it so’s the head shrinks. They carry the shrunken heads around their necks as souvenirs.”

“No, Belcher. That’s not right. They carries them around “cos they’re magic. The goblins want to share in the victim’s strengths and his powers, you see.”

“Nah! Loada baloney, if you ask me.”

“Aye, “taint nowt but a pile o’ bleedin’ codswallop!”

Ellie looked at her watch again. It was nearly half past ten, yet none of the men seemed in the mood for leaving and the landlord had made no move to lock the door and close the curtains.

“Anyway,” said Olson, finishing his ale and getting to his feet. “We’d best be off upstairs, if we’re to be up early tomorrow. I’ll see you up there. Now don’t be long.”

Gareth’s lips didn’t move, but she could have sworn she heard him muttering to himself. “As if we needed reminding – blooming slave-driver!”

Elzabet had heard it, too, and he smiled at Ellie and helped her to her feet. If anything, she was stiffer now than she had been when she got off the pony earlier that evening.



All too soon, there was a loud rapping on the door of their bedroom and Ellie and Bethany sat up in the bed they were

sharing and peered around. “Your early morning call!” a woman lilted, coming into the room with a bowl of steaming water. “Rise and shine, little ones!”

They lay there for a few moments dozing, then they roused themselves, had a cat lick and got dressed. Ellie wiped the sleep from her eyes and looked at her watch, thinking that they had all the time in the world. Half past seven.

“Half past seven! Oh, crikey! Better get a shift on, Bethany – we're late!” she cried and they made a hasty exit from the room and downstairs, brushing their hair as they went.

It was not until they entered the bar that Ellie realized there must be some kind of mistake: they couldn't possibly have overslept. Perhaps the landlady had mistaken Olson's request?

Ellie consulted her pocket watch again: seven thirty five. But when she double-checked with the old grandfather clock in the bar, she was surprised to find that it read only six thirty five. Surely her watch wouldn't have gained an hour since she'd last set it?

“Do you have the correct time, please?” she asked the landlady when she came through to the bar to take their orders for breakfast.

The landlady looked at her as if she were mentally deficient in some way or innumerate, glanced at the grandfather clock and said: “Why, it's coming up to twenty to seven, little one,” and she went away to sort out the meals.

“Why do you ask?” enquired Olson.

“Well, the clock over there has a quarter to seven, but I have only a quarter to six.”

Olson laughed out loud. “Of course! Time's different in the east,” he said. “They're an hour behind us, though don't ask me why: it would make more sense for them to be an hour ahead, since the sun rises in the east.”

So that would explain it. Yes, surely it should be the other way about? Oh well, maybe things were different in the Free Lands?

“Bethany? Let's have a quick look at that clue again before the other guests come down for breakfast.”

Bethany obliged and read it out:

My friends, there is

No time to waste ...

"No, the next bit."

"Sorry:"

You'll find me running a little slow

Down at the Cow and Gate

I am somewhat behind the times

So drink up now, it's late.

"Running a little slow ..." Bethany echoed. "... behind the times ..."

"Behind the clock!" yelled Gareth. And he was off across the bar and feeling behind the rosewood case.

"Da – da!" he whooped, holding up a familiar-looking package.

Just then, two other guests came in and gave Gareth peculiar looks as he scrabbled about on the floor on his hands and knees. He slipped the package in his jumper, got up and strolled back to his seat. "Lost half a scruple on the floor," he said loudly by way of a plausible explanation.

One of the newcomers nodded. "Wretched little coins – more trouble than they're worth. Don't know why they don't just do away with them."

"But I don't get it," complained Bethany in a whisper when Gareth had taken his seat. "What's that stuff about 'drink up now, it's late'?"

"Poetic licence, I'd expect," decided Olson.

Ellie gulped her food down and shook her head. "I think we were supposed to discover it last night, before closing time," she said. "So we'd better hurry up after all – because we are late."

Bethany surreptitiously took the package from Gareth and unfolded it on her lap.

"What's it say, then?" asked Gareth, polishing off his bacon and eggs and tucking into his toast.

Bethany cut round the yolk of her egg and popped it in her mouth whole, so that it burst in her mouth. She had a drink of lemonade and then she read the verse in a whisper:

Some are soft and flat and

Some have a pointed peak

But it's in the top one that

You'll find what you really seek.

“Well, that's as clear as mud,” Gareth complained.

“Mountains?” suggested Elzabet helpfully.

“Hmm,” grunted Olson. “There can't be many soft and flat ones.”

“They could have snow on them. That'd make them soft and fluffy,” chipped-in Gareth.

“Soft and fluffy, my ass. In any case, there aren't any mountains for miles around.”

Bethany had finished her breakfast now and she was raring to go. “We should get a bit of shopping in – our food stock's getting a bit low, I've noticed,” she decided. Then she turned to Ellie: “Coming?”

Gareth was up on his feet, too, and he was chivvying Elzabet along. “Yeah, good idea. Do hurry up, Elzabet.”

Olson looked at them, realizing that he'd been outflanked, and then at the clock. “Okay, but be back within the hour – we're already running late as it is, remember?”

Again, though Gareth didn't speak, Ellie could hear him grumbling away in her head. Maybe it was the influence of the Elvenstone; maybe it was with simply spending time with Elzabet – Ellie didn't know. But there was no denying that she was developing unusual skills as the quest progressed.

There were soldiers everywhere they went in the town. Many of them had their packs on and it looked like they were doing a spot of last-minute shopping themselves before moving on.

As she'd half-expected, Gareth and Elzabet had made a bee-line for The Box of Tricks and were deeply engrossed in the magical paraphernalia in the shop window. Ellie wouldn't have minded having a look inside there herself, but Bethany was dragging her off down the street and into the hat shop.

“May I help you?” enquired the lady proprietor, coming forward from behind a counter.

“We're just browsing at the moment, thanks,” Ellie replied. “If that's alright with you?”

“Certainly, my dear – feel free.”

Ellie looked at the vast array of hats and helmets on display and she tried on a very snazzy-looking plumed helmet. “What do you think, Bethany?” she asked, admiring herself in a full-length

mirror. But Bethany's head was elsewhere. She was looking at an elegant range of feathered hats and working her way along to the one she'd spotted the previous night with the peacock feather decoration. Ellie tried on a top hat. My, wouldn't she look dashing wearing that astride her pony?

"Do you have this in a slightly smaller size?" asked Bethany, showing the woman the hat with the peacock feather.

"Yes, I believe so, madam," the proprietor replied and she got down on her hands and knees under the counter. "Ah, yes. Try this one."

Bethany tried the hat on and paraded in front of the mirror. "Yes, that's fine, thanks. I'll take it."

"Simply exquisite," the woman cooed. "Would madam like a box?"

"No, thanks – I'll wear it now," Bethany said, and she reached in her purse and paid the woman.

They left the shop and went across the road to pick up a few provisions. "What do you think?" asked Bethany, admiring her reflection in the shop window.

"I think it really suits you," Ellie replied sincerely. "A very good choice, in my opinion."

When they'd collected the provisions, Ellie and Bethany wandered back up the street. They passed by The Box of Tricks and then, on second or third thoughts they backtracked and went inside, unable to contain their idle curiosity. Gareth and Elzabet were just coming out and they had their arms full with things they'd bought.

The shop didn't look very big from outside, but in actual fact the premises went back a long way and there were more rooms full to the gunwales both upstairs and down. There was a whole library full of books on every magical subject imaginable from aromatic oils through necromancy to zodiac signs. In another room there were candles in every colour and shape imaginable. Some were even carved into the shape of embracing lovers. Downstairs there were shelf upon shelf of raw ingredients for spells and potions: the usual herbs and spices and exotic preparations like bat's wing and rat's tail – and some things that really didn't bear mention, like the seminal vesicles of worms and cockroaches' mandibles.

And there was a whole range of ready-made remedies for all manner of bodily and emotional ailments from acne to zelophobia, which apparently was “an irrational or morbid aversion to or fear of jealousy,” according to the pint size bottle.

“Well,” said Ellie, checking her watch. “I’d love to have stayed longer, but Olson is going to be pacing up and down waiting for us.”

“S’pose so,” sighed Bethany, as they left the shop and headed up the street. “We’ll have to come back some other day.”

Then Ellie had a sudden thought and she thrust her bag of provisions into Bethany’s hands. “You keep walking – I’ve just realized I’ve forgotten something.” And with that she was racing back down the street toward the hat shop.

Almost out of breath, she went into the shop and dashed over to where the top hat had been. It had gone.

She turned to the woman behind the counter. “Um ... the top hat you had for sale – where is it, please?”

“Oh, that? Why I sold it not ten minutes ago to a gentleman.”
Oh, hell.

“I’ve got one or two more, just like it ...” the woman offered, reaching under the counter.

“Er ... no, it’s alright thanks.” Then: “You didn’t happen to see which direction the gentleman went off in, did you?”

“No, I’m sorry, dear. You see, I’m rather short-sighted. I can scarcely see the shop window from here.”

“Okay, no worries,” said Ellie and she looked anxiously up and down the street. There wasn’t another top hat to be seen.

With a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Ellie trudged back up the main street toward the Cow and Gate. By the time she arrived, Bethany was already there, sitting with Olson and Elzabet in the bar, waiting for her. Gareth had yet to appear.

“What is being the matter?” asked Elzabet, immediately sensing her disquiet.

“I’m afraid we’ve just lost our next clue in the treasure hunt,” she groaned.

“But we haven’t got ...” began Bethany at the top of her voice. Elzabet clapped his hand over the girl’s mouth to quieten her.

“We haven’t got the fourth part of you-know-what, yet,”

Bethany whispered.

“The trail has gone cold,” Ellie told her, waving her arms in the air. She was close to tears. “To be blunt ... We've failed.”

There was stunned silence.

21. Pendravia

Just then, as the wake was getting warmed up, Gareth walked in, beaming from ear to ear and bearing a large bag full of goodies from The Box of Tricks. Then he noticed the forlorn-looking faces.

“What's up?” he asked, edging closer.

Ellie explained their predicament.

“Oh, no. Well, that's really done it,” he commiserated.

Gareth placed the bag down in front of him and whipped something out from behind his back. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Gareth, this is no time for ...” Ellie's voice trailed off.

“Mucking about? What – me?” asked Gareth innocently. “Well, what do you think?”

He stood there sporting his latest fashion accessory – the top hat.

“The hat! You've got the hat!” Ellie yelped. Quite what the landlord thought of all this, she didn't know. Just then, she didn't even care.

She got to her feet and gave Gareth a big hug. “You're a regular blooming hero!” she told him.

“Why?” asked Gareth, giving her a funny look and sitting down beside her. “Is there something I'm missing here?”

Bethany pulled out the clue and read it out again:

*Some are soft and flat and
Some have a pointed peak
But it's in the top one that
You'll find what you really seek.*

Gareth's poker face suddenly creased-up into a big grin. “I know,” he said, tossing the hat in Ellie's direction: “I was just fooling around, that's all.”

Ellie sat with the top hat in her lap and felt the lining inside. There was definitely something sewn into the top of the hat. She borrowed Elzabet's knife and carefully slit round the material, pulled out a scrap of parchment and passed it surreptitiously along the table to Bethany; then she passed the hat back to Gareth

who popped it back on his head.

“Well?” asked Olson, a tad impatiently.

“Well?” retorted Bethany. “Well what?”

The man chose to ignore the remark.

“Well, when you're all sitting comfortably,” she said, “I shall begin.”

*Without more delay
Head for Mithil-Gor
And knock three times
On the monastery door.
Show the fabled gem
And ask for Brother Lu
This man is a friend
And he'll know what to do.*

Without further delay, the group settled up with the landlord, went to retrieve their mounts from the stables and set off down the main street. There seemed to be fewer soldiers around now and the reason for that became apparent as they took the road toward the east. On the way, they passed column after column of troops – many of them scarcely in their teens and still more carrying little more than pitch forks for weapons. They were heading for Mithil-Gor at what was, for them, a terrific lick.

“It's lucky I'm with you,” Olson told Elzabet. “Chances are you'd have been pressed into service by now. Those aren't our fighting elite – they're mostly unhappy and unseasoned conscripts.”

“Come on, you lot!” the man complained, and he spurred his horse into a gallop.

“For crying out loud!” Gareth retorted, hanging onto his top hat and squeezing it onto his head to stop it falling off. “Is that all you can do – give out orders?”

Ellie was quite surprised by the lad's sudden outburst – though friction had perhaps been building for some time now – and Olson seemed rather taken aback.

“Forgive me,” Olson said at length, “but I want to make sure that we get to Mithil-Gor before the enemy.”

“So, Gareth, what did you find at The Box of Tricks?” asked Bethany, pulling her pony alongside his, presumably to take his mind off things.

Gareth's face lit up. "I bought a wand made of willow," he told her, "and an old book full of spells."

"Master Gareth was being interested in a book of advanced spells, but I was guiding him to something more basic," Elzabet added.

"Do magic wands work?" asked Ellie.

"Oh yes, indeed, Mistress Ellie – if the wand is being in the right hands wielded, and with right intention. Have no doubt about this thing."

"So have you tried any spells yet, Gareth?" asked Bethany.

"Well, I managed to conjure-up some jelly beans," Gareth said, and he produced a handful from his pocket and passed them round the others.

"But you could do that sort of things anyway, when you were in Elvenglade," said Bethany.

"I could, but not recently ..."

"Yes," Elzabet interjected. "I am thinking it is because of the presence of the dread Lord Develin and the Dark Forces. The wand it is the process helping."

"What about other things, though?" asked Bethany.

"Such as?"

"Well, like turning a prince into a frog, or *versi vica*."

Elzabet laughed. "These things is a long time taking, Mistress Bethany! Practice is perfect making!"

Ellie laughed, too:

The elf's a poet

And he don't know it!

"Yes," said Bethany – quick as a flash:

Some poems rhyme

... And some don't.

"Actually, Elzabet has been helping me with some minor miracles," Gareth piped-up, bringing the conversation back on topic.

"Yes? Go on ..."

"Tell you what – here's a demonstration." Gareth reached in his pocket and pulled out the wand. He muttered a few words under his breath and waved his wand in the direction of the sky. Ellie could envisage a shower of stars and sparks flying from the end of it, but there were none.

A grey bird came sailing through the air toward Gareth and he tapped the wand on his shoulder. Unfortunately, instead of the bird landing on his shoulder as he seemed to be indicating, the bird merely flew past. And on the way past it dumped its load and Gareth's shoulder was splattered with pigeon droppings.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," he groaned, looking at the dribbling mess.

It was all the others could do to keep a straight face, and Bethany had to drop her pony back a bit whilst she lay over the animal, creased with mirth.

However, their mirth was to be short-lived.

Further down the road, they came across a procession of horse-drawn carts and a long train of people coming the other way. That was not a good sign. It turned out that they were mostly civilians, refugees not only from Mithil-Gor, fearful of being caught in an invasion, but also from towns to the north of Pendravica that had already fallen to the goblin legions. And there were also many wounded soldiers, remnants of the Pendravican army which was falling back in the face of the onslaught.

By mid afternoon they were within sight of Mithil-Gor. It stood on a high hill surrounded by a ring of smaller hills, and the armies of the Free Lands and of Pendravica had their standards raised on these smaller hills. Of the enemy, however, as yet they could see no sign.

They snaked their way through the narrow valleys between the hills, climbed up to enter Mithil-Gor by the western gate and made straight for the monastery which stood in its own grounds within the vast city walls. As they came up a short driveway, they dismounted and approached the door on foot.

Olson stepped forward and banged loudly on the door knocker three times, as the verse had instructed. There was no reply. So he banged again and for a third time. Finally a hatch opened in the sturdy oak door and a hooded figure appeared at a rusted metal grill.

"Yes?" the doorkeeper asked impassively.

"Captain Jezuel Olson and party," Olson replied as if this should be authority enough to gain them admittance.

"Yes?"

"We're here to see Brother Lu."

“Brother Lu is unavailable,” the man said.

Ellie fished the silk purse from her pocket, took the brightly-shining Elvenstone out and held it up to the man's face, lighting up his features in its fiery-glow.

The man was startled and took a pace back, then, drawing a deep breath, he turned a key in the lock and opened the door. “You'd better come in,” he said and he bowed them inside.

They entered a covered courtyard, leading their mounts, and he closed the door firmly behind them. “You may leave the animals here – they will be taken care of,” the man said. “Please wait here and I will let Brother Lu know that you have arrived.”

The group waited – and they waited – and they waited – growing more and more impatient as the time passed. Ellie sat down at the bottom of a flight of steps and practised the breathing exercises that Elzabet had shown her, to calm her mind, and she repeated a phrase that he'd taught her, over and over in her head.

It is better to use the time available than to fight uselessly against it, she seemed to hear Elzabet say to her. She turned and found him looking at her and smiling serenely. First the mind is depraved, he told her. After that comes the stage where it is self-accusing; then inspired; serene; fulfilled; fulfilling, and finally the mind is purified and complete. Those were only words, but it was something very real to her – she was coming to live it wholeheartedly.

A hooded figure was coming across the courtyard now with two others following in his wake. “See to the animals, will you, please?” the monk asked and while the others were leading their mounts away, he came forward and introduced himself.

“Hello there, I'm Brother Lu. I believe you want to see me?”

“We were told you could help us,” Olson said and he gave Ellie the nod. She held the Elvenstone up in front of her. The man was dazzled by its fiery radiance.

“You have three pieces, I see,” the man said. Clearly, he was “in the Know”.

“We seek the fourth,” Ellie told him. “We were told you'd know what to do to help us.”

“Very well,” he said. “Please bear with me. I'll be back in just a few moments.”

When Brother Lu returned, he was carrying a letter. “I

believe this is for you,” he said.

Bethany held out her hand and took the letter from him. Wasting no time, she slit the letter open and read out the contents:

Dear Fellow Wayfarers,

By now, we predict that much of Pendravia will have fallen to the goblin legions. If this is so, as we believe, then it will not be safe for you to remain at Mithil-Gor.

Brother Lu is a representative of the Guardians of the Secret and you may trust him implicitly. Allow him to go with you on your quest – his guidance and resourcefulness will more than pay his passage.

Head straight for Dar-al-Azoth and make contact with the Friends once you arrive. They will issue you with further instructions. Godspeed, my friends!

I am your humble servant,

Mortimus Finkle,

Secretary to the Council of the Free Lands.

Bethany handed the letter to Brother Lu and he read it, then handed it back. He called across to the men helping him. “I’m sorry to mess you about brothers, but there’s been a last minute change of plan. Don’t bother stabling the animals, bring them back and saddle my horse instead, please.”

Brother Lu turned back to the group. “If you’ll excuse me for a few more moments, I need to pack,” and he walked briskly away across the courtyard.

And as soon as the man returned, without further ado they were on their way once more at a canter, this time heading south-west.

“This will be a dangerous journey,” Brother Lu warned them. “In order to reach Dar-al-Azoth we must cut across the north-western tip of Morakesh – behind enemy lines – and cross the Black Mountains through a series of treacherous passes.”

22. Morakesh

The party travelled south-west throughout the day until they came to a great river marking the border with Morakesh. There were dark storm clouds to the south and the river was heavily swollen from the recent rain which caused its waters to run brown. There was a monumental stone bridge ahead of them, spanning the river.

“But I thought the skagrats had no truck with the Pendravians?” queried Olson.

“It wasn't always that way,” Brother Lu explained. “The original inhabitants, the Moraks, were a relatively peace-loving people and their trade routes spanned the globe. It was called the Golden Age, before the First Great War. That bridge is a remnant and a reminder of those former days.”

“And since those times?”

“The skagrat hordes invaded the land during the First Great War and even though they were eventually beaten back in the carnage that followed, the Free Landers were never again able to dislodge them from Morakesh. This was partly due to the brutal nature of the terrain which favoured the Dark Forces who defended it, and partly due to a lack of political will. The war had lasted twenty years and its cost in resources and manpower had been colossal and unsustainable. In the end, the people were happy enough to have rid them from the Free Lands. They left others to mop-up the remaining enemy in Azakstan and Pendravia.”

Brother Lu abruptly changed the subject: “May I borrow your telescope?” he asked Olson. How the man could know Olson had such a thing was beyond Ellie's comprehension, but apparently he did, unless it was simply a wild guess, which seemed unlikely.

Brother Lu scanned the land over the other side of the river and trained the telescope on the bridge. Then he folded the telescope up and gave it back to Olson.

“It's as I thought,” he said at length. Then to Ellie, by way of explanation: “I should have listened to my intuition, young lady.

The skagrats have guards posted at the far end of the bridge and by the looks of the tents, I'd say they have a company of men nearby. I expect they're waiting for the goblin legions to take Mithil-Gor before joining up with them. They have a shaky alliance and the skagrats would rather the goblins provided the cannon fodder than their own men."

"The Pendravians have cannon?" asked Olson.

"A very few, but the Free Landers have brought what they could spare from Duvallen."

"And the goblins?"

"It's said they have many. Their cannon balls are solid iron, however – they don't explode on impact. So, though they are frightening devices, they are not as potent a weapon as they might be. In the past, the Guardians have done their best to stop the knowledge of this technology spreading, but they have fought a losing battle. Once the Dark Forces discovered and mastered the science, there was little choice for the Directorate – they had to pass on the discoveries to the Free Landers, so that they would not be overwhelmed in the next war."

"These Guardians – they predicted this war?" asked Ellie.

Brother Lu nodded. "But for them, after the disarmament following the First Great War, the Free Lands would have utterly fallen by now ... Knowledge is a dangerous thing, you know."

"Anyhow, we must be away," said Brother Lu. He wheeled his horse to the right and they headed west, following the bank of the river. Ellie had little idea where they might be going and could do nothing but place her trust in this newcomer, who seemed to know the terrain well. And these Guardians he had mentioned. What were they? Some kind of Overlords? Puppet masters?

Brother Lu turned his head and smiled at her. "Please believe me that the Directorate have the best interests of the people at heart. Things are awry in Aspas and it is their function to ensure the survival and the long-term viability of the people, until circumstances again change for the better."

"Aspas?"

"That is what they call this mortal coil," he told her. "As we are but drops in the ocean, so this world is but an oyster in the Greater Sea."

“Do you come from outer space?” she asked.

The man raised his eyebrows, surprised that she should have an inkling of such things, and he pointed to the sky. “Amongst our own, we are known as the People of the Stars,” he said.

They'd ridden for perhaps an hour and the sun was beginning to sink behind the foothills and the distant mountain peaks to the west, when Brother Lu brought his mount to a halt. He looked out over the river. Surely, he wasn't insane enough to propose that they swim their ponies across the swollen river?

“Oh ye of little faith!” the man laughed, and he stood up in his stirrups, waving his hands in the air.

And then Ellie saw it. A long rope had been stretched over the river and at the far side there was a ferry, tethered to the rope. There were two men aboard and they were heaving on the rope, slowly working their way across the water toward them. Eventually, the ferry reached them and bumped into the bank.

One of the ferrymen came forward. “Now, let me see ... ten scruples each and five for each animal,” he said. “Another fifty since we've got to make two trips ... and fifty on account of the weather ... Let's just call it a nice round two Nobles, shall we?”

Olson looked like he was going to haggle with the men at the point of a sword, but it was vital that they get across the river in one piece, so Ellie dipped in her purse and paid up without question.

The ferryman turned to his mate as they set off. “I had a little rowing boat before I had this ferry built,” he said. “And one day I was hired to ferry a scholar across the water. Well, the fellah asked me what the crossing was going to be like and I said to 'im 'Don't ask me nothing about it.' So the pedant says to me 'Have you never learnt grammar?' and I says 'No'. Well, he pipes-up, 'Then half your life has been wasted.' Anyhow, we's near on half way across when it gets up rough and the old boat starts bobbin' about all over the shop. And so I says to the fellah: 'Have you never learnt to swim?' And he says 'No, why?' and I tells 'im, I does: 'Then all your life has been wasted, schoolmaster, 'cos we's sinking!'” the ferryman laughed raucously.

After what seemed like an age and two rather bumpy crossings, they were all over the other side.

The ferryman held out his hand to Brother Lu, but the man

was not impressed. "You want a tip?" he asked. The ferryman nodded eagerly. "Well, I'll give you a tip that money can't buy, since it will save your miserable lives at the hands of the skagrats."

The ferryman frowned. "Ar?"

"You must sink your ferry."

When they were mounted and away, Ellie broached the subject with Brother Lu. "How do you know these things?"

"Because I am a representative of the Guardians of the Secret and connected to the energy of the Tradition just as the Elvenstone is able to store it," he told her. Then he sighed deeply. "And I know another thing ..."

"Such as?"

"I know that those fools will not heed my advice and their fate will inevitably be as I foretold. The skagrats will commandeer the ferry and the ferrymen will forfeit their lives, before the week is out."

They went as far as the foothills before they stopped to rest and let the animals feed. Gareth was going to make a camp-fire, but Brother Lu intervened. "No," he said firmly, shaking his head. "It is too dangerous. The wolves would smell the smoke a league downwind and the skagrats might spot the flames when night falls. They are sharp-sighted."

And so they ate a cold meal, largely in silence. They were in Morakesh now and there was something about the land that Ellie didn't like.

"Yes, you'd never know by looking at this foul, God-forsaken place, but it was once a beautiful land with fine gardens," Brother Lu told her. "See how the storms gather over the land."

Indeed, as far as the eye could see, the land was hung over by angry, slate-grey clouds of doom, gloom and foreboding.

He pointed to the distant sky-line. "And the columns of acrid black smoke that you see in the distance? Those are from the chimneys of the skagrat factories, churning out weaponry for their vast arsenal. Day and night the Morak slaves toil in those dark, Develian foundries."

"The Moraks are enslaved?"

"Indeed. And such are the powers of the Dark Forces and the cancer which blights the land, they are as wraiths, burnt-out shells

of their former noble selves. You would not like to live in Morakesh. Some call it the Land of the Undead or of the Damned – but damned by the Demiurge Develin and his dark minions – not by the Good Lord.

“Anyhow, it's time we got a little sleep.”

“But it's still early,” said Gareth.

“We must ride through the night,” Brother Lu explained.

“Shouldn't one of us remain on guard?” asked Bethany, her eyes darting all around her into the gloom.

“Fear not,” Brother Lu said. “I shall sleep with one eye open.” And with that he lay down and fell asleep almost before his head touched the pack which served as his pillow.

Ellie tossed and turned; too anxious and pumped up with adrenalin, despite her breathing exercises. But she must have fallen asleep in the end, for she awoke sharply to find Brother Lu standing over her. The sun had gone down and already the pearly-white orb of the moon was coming up over the horizon.

“Come,” the man said. “It is time to leave.”

Higher and higher they climbed into the foothills and Ellie was oblivious to the greater part of the journey. She kept half dozing off and waking with a start. Brother Lu brought his horse alongside.

“Here, eat this,” he said, offering her a handful of leaves. What did he think she was – a rabbit?

“What's that?” she asked.

“Something to help you stay awake,” he said. “We need to be vigilant.”

They were skirting round the mountains now. According to Brother Lu's reckoning they were travelling south-west, though this meant little to Ellie or the others. Even Olson admitted he'd never been this far south before.

By three in the morning, the whole party was at its lowest ebb. This was the time when they'd normally have been in their deepest sleep, and all conversation had by now dried up. And still, Brother Lu coaxed them on. Olson's many requests had been but a minor prelude to the ordeal they were now asked to endure.

Eventually the sky began to lighten, signalling the false dawn, and Ellie could see the vast mountain range looming up before them. They were heading for a pass between two

prominent mountain peaks. Finally, dawn came and brother Lu led them away from the pass and up a low, u-shaped valley cut into the rock by some ancient glacier. They were shielded from view now.

Let's rest," the man said at last and they got down from their mounts and lay wearily in the long grass. Ellie looked around her and she was amazed by the vast expanse of wild flowers around them which covered the valley floor like some luxurious carpet.

"There are easier routes across the mountains," Brother Lu explained to them, "but I am hoping that the skagrats will not know of this old smuggling route. With luck, we'll make it through to Azakstan in one piece before tomorrow dawns."

But that was another twenty four hours away – and they were already so very weary.

"Don't worry, you'll find your second wind," Brother Lu said in encouragement.

"Second wind? What's that?"

"Your hidden reserves of stamina and resourcefulness," he told her.

If they thought the trek up into the foothills was arduous enough, then they could think again when faced with the mountain pass that stood before them. In places it was so steep that they had to alight and drag the animals up. In others, they had to cross scree slopes where the rocks had broken up with the cycles of freezing and thawing, and these slopes were treacherous and hard-going underfoot.

But worst of all was a section where they could no longer follow the valley floor but had to take to a narrow path which snaked its way up the side of the mountain. In places they had to edge carefully along narrow ledges leading their frightened animals, with long drops over the side to the rocks below.

And it was getting colder and the air more rarefied up here, until what would have been an easy walk at sea-level became a major source of exertion. They were well above the tree-line now and their way was made all the more hazardous when they hit patches of ice. Brother Lu had had the sense to bring spikes along which he could pull on and fit over the toes of his boots, but the others did not have this luxury. More than once, someone suddenly lurched forward as their feet went from under them and

they landed face down, or they went sliding.

That's precisely what happened to Elzabet. The elf suddenly lost his balance and went tobogganing down a slope. He snatched out his knife and dug the blade deep into the frozen snow and this slowed his descent, but it didn't stop him. The blade ploughed through the snow as he slithered closer and closer to the edge of a great precipice.

He kicked out frantically, trying to dig his toes in to stop his descent. And finally he came to rest within inches of the edge, safe for the moment but not daring to move, in case he should begin slipping again. And – what was worse – he was the one carrying their spare rope in his back pack.

The others stood there looking on helplessly, but Brother Lu had seen what was happening. He passed the reins of his horse to Olson, then he reached in his pack and pulled out a coil of rope and tied it to his saddle.

“When I say 'pull', I want you to lead the horse up the path,” he ordered, then he tied the other end of the rope around his waist and clambered gingerly down the slope toward Elzabet.

The others waited anxiously as he edged closer and closer to the brink of the precipice. And then he dare go no further.

“Elzabet?” they heard him call.

“Elzabet, when I say the word, I want you to let go of the knife and grab hold of my hands. Do you understand?”

Brother Lu dug his axe in and stretched out in the snow until his hands were within inches of Elzabet's.

“Olson? When I say 'pull', pull for your very life! Got that?”

“Okay.”

“Ready Elzabet? And don't try to retrieve the knife or anything stupid like that. On the count of three, grab my hands and hang on. Understand?”

“Right. One ... two ... three! Pull, Olson, pull!”

Brother Lu had Elzabet's hands in his own now and he was hanging on for grim death as the elf began to slip over the edge.

Olson tugged at the horse and walked it slowly up the path, dragging Brother Lu and Elzabet up the slope after it.

And finally, the two of them were safe. They lay there in the snow, their hands still clasped together and very thankful to still be alive.

After that worrying episode, they roped themselves together.

They couldn't afford to rest on their laurels, however. "We must be across the mountains before nightfall," Brother Lu informed them. "There's no time to rest and the path is too perilous to take at night."

There was a little more climbing to do, but Ellie just kept her head down and put her back into it. Finally they arrived at the head of the pass and they were on their way back down the other side on a path which switched back and forth as it snaked its way down the mountainside.

Looking down on the land from this great height, the place looked so green and tranquil and so much of a contrast to the storm-laden realm of Morakesh from which they'd come. It was hard to believe that much of it had recently fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Brother Lu again seemed to have intercepted her thoughts. "This will be the most dangerous section of our journey. The place is sure to be teeming with skagrats and rakes."

23. Azakstan

It was easier going on the way back down the other side and they were able to ride their mounts once they were out of the snow-line. Dusk was just coming as they finally left the mountainside and began to cross the foothills. Only then would Brother Lu allow them time to eat, and again it was a cold meal. As soon as they'd finished, he told them they'd better sleep and, unlike the previous night, Ellie was so dog tired that she fell asleep almost instantly.

All too soon, however, they were being roused and they clambered wearily into their saddles and moved relentlessly on.

They hadn't gone far when Brother Lu spotted riders in the distance and he wheeled his horse round. Olson had seen them, too, and he had his telescope trained on them.

"Skagrats," Olson said and he looked all around him for possible cover.

Brother Lu had the rope out again and he walked his horse over to Ellie. "Trust me," he said and, cutting off a length, he wound the rope around Ellie's wrists – tightly enough that it looked like they were tied, but still loose enough for her to slip her hands out if need be. He peered into her eyes and told her as much without having to say a word.

Brother Lu went round all of them until they were all tied, except for him, and he took Olson and Gareth's swords and tucked them into their packs.

The riders were approaching now and Ellie could see their ugly black faces. There were at least a dozen of them and they were heavily armed.

Brother Lu threw his hood back and when she saw the man staring at her through deep, black, whirlpool eyes, Ellie nearly died of fright. She was looking into the face of a skagrat.

But that was ridiculous. They'd been given the word of the Council that Brother Lu was deeply trusted – unless, of course, he'd forged the letter himself ... No, in any case, why had the man tied their hands so loosely?

"Trust me!" he implored them as Olson struggled free of his

bindings. Brother Lu had to go back and re-tie his hands – and quickly. “I have the ability to shape change. It's a strain, though, and I can't maintain this guise for long, but it may help gain us safe passage into Dar-al-Azoth.”

So that was his game plan.

“Trust me?” he said to Olson.

Olson nodded, though a little reluctantly.

Brother Lu threw his robes off now and they saw that he wore the black uniform of the skagrats, with an ugly, black-bladed scimitar at his side.

Again, Ellie faltered, wondering if this was still a trick after all.

“Right, now remember you're my prisoners. Try to act as if you really are. Don't worry, you won't be questioned – I'll do all the talking,” he told them and he flicked his horse on.

It looked as if the skagrats were going to stop the party and question Brother Lu, but Ellie could hear him muttering something under his breath in just the way that she'd heard Elzabet. He was projecting thoughts, so that the skagrats would think they were their own.

“It's only a skagrat slave trader,” she heard him say in some strange, guttural language. “Let them pass.”

And that's exactly what happened. As the riders passed they exchanged some indecipherable greeting with Brother Lu and they went riding straight past. With the exception of one skagrat who was almost slaving at the sight of her and Bethany, they paid the captives little attention.

When the skagrats had ridden out of sight, Brother Lu quite gladly resumed his former shape. It must have been quite a strain, because the sweat was pouring down his face and dribbling off the end of his chin.

They left the foothills and crossed the plain toward Dar-al-Azoth. There were more skagrat patrols out and about now and Brother Lu had to revert to the skagrat guise on several occasions.

And then, with their hearts on their mouths, they entered the town. Fortunately, the fortress lay some way out of town atop a mound and the majority of the troops were camped nearby. There were just a handful of the creatures patrolling the town and life there actually seemed relatively normal. The shops were open;

there was an abundance of livestock and food on sale in the market in the town square; people had their washing out, hung on lines high above the main street, and children were playing by the roadside.

They stopped at an inn just off the square and took their mounts round to the stables while Brother Lu knocked at a side door in the courtyard.

A pleasantly plump woman came to the door and she was just about to enquire what Brother Lu wanted, when she suddenly recognized him.

“Lu! How are you doing?” she greeted him, giving the man a big hug. “My. It's been some time since we last saw you.”

“Megan!” said Brother Lu, swinging her round in his arms. “It's so good to see you.”

Then the woman's attention turned to the others who stood there with their wrists still bound. “These are my friends,” he told her, going to untie them. “Just a ruse to get past the skagrats.”

“You'll be looking for a room out of the way of the skagrats?” she enquired rhetorically, spitting on the ground as she said the name.

“Yes, please.”

“You realize the skagrats have taken the town?”

Ellie heard Olson thinking “as if we couldn't tell!”

“Of course you have – what I mean is, you realize how dangerous it is around here?”

She was thinking not only of their safety but of her own and that of her family, thought Ellie.

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, you'd better come inside and go up by the back stairs. We have a couple of skagrat officers billeted here, so it might not be wise to use the bar. We have a spare room upstairs in our quarters. It'll be a bit cramped, of course, but at least it'll be a roof over your heads, out of the way of the skagrats.”

They followed the woman in and she sent her red-haired daughter out to see to the animals.

“This way,” she said and she led them through the kitchen, up a flight of stairs and along a short corridor until they came to a small bedroom. There was no bed in there and the room was being used to store boxes in it, but as the woman said, it was

better than a kick in the teeth or a dagger in the buttock.

“You must be famished? Give me half an hour and I'll see what I can rustle up. You'd best eat up here – and don't go making a lot of noise! Sorry about all the boxes – just stack them up against the back wall to make yourselves a bit of space.”

“So, what's life like under skagrat domination?” asked Brother Lu as Megan brought a tray of food into the room.

“Strangely normal, actually,” she said, laying the tray down and sitting cross-legged with them on the floor.

“And what did you expect?” asked Olson.

“Well, that we'd all be slaughtered or clapped in chains, I suppose. Sure, that did happen to some, but for the most part, as long as we behave ourselves ...”

Ellie could have sworn the woman nearly said “co-operate”.

“... and as long as we pay our tithes, they largely leave us alone.”

“Tithes?” asked Gareth.

“We have to pay them a tenth of our produce or our income. In the case of the farmers it's a tenth of their harvest and their new-born livestock. In our case, it's a tenth of our takings – that and the odd barrel of ale – we brew some of our own on the premises, you see.”

“Hmm,” said Olson. “That sounds rather like a feudal system. Perhaps it's a new political experiment?”

“Well, the resistance gave them quite a tough time before they slackened their grip. The natives were getting restless. Maybe you're right?”

“Do they still allow you safe passage in and out of town?” Brother Lu wanted to know.

“They issue permits at the mayor's office,” she told them.

“So the mayor's office still retain their powers?”

“In a fashion. I think they've let him retain his job to keep the people happy. But they say he's just a puppet in the skagrats' hands. Some folk say he should refuse to do his job, but then they haven't got knives held to their throats!”

“Do you think the mayor could get permits for us?” Brother Lu asked.

“To travel where?”

“To Dun-Hallow.”

“I think people have had them before, but that was on business. You'd need a good excuse,” she said. “They don't let ordinary people come and go willy-nilly.”

Then: “How did you manage to get here, anyway?”

“I shape shifted,” Brother Lu replied. “I made myself look like a skagrat slave trader – but it puts a strain on me.”

Ellie nearly said something, but didn't. She daren't even think it.

“I see. I wish the Guardians had taught me how to shape shift – I'd be out of here before you could say 'Mortimus Finkle!'”

Mortimus Finkle was the Secretary to the Council of the Free Lands.

So Megan, too, was a representative of the Guardians of the Secret, by the sound of it.

The woman read her mind. “Yes, I am in the Know,” she said. “But Lu here – he's in an altogether different league. If anyone can get you through safely, it's Brother Lu.”

“You know of our mission, then?” asked Ellie.

Megan nodded. “Heard it on the Grapevine,” she said.

“We were told that we'd receive fresh instructions once we reached Dar-al-Azoth.”

The woman thought for a minute, with her hand clapped across her right temple, then she turned back to Ellie and said: “You'll be wanting to have a word with Silas Troad.”

“And where might we find this Silas Troad?” asked Bethany.

“You'll find him, serendipitously, in the sanitation department, right next door to the mayor's office. He's a rat catcher,” she told him.

Almost as soon as the woman had left, Brother Lu turned to Ellie. “What's on your mind?” he asked.

Ellie thought back to what the woman had said. “The woman said they were left alone as long as they behave ourselves ... but I'm sure she was thinking as long as they co-operate, and that's not far removed from 'collaborate'.”

“Indeed, it's not. It's as I thought,” Brother Lu nodded and he put his plate down. “There's no time to waste, not even to eat this food,” he said. Before the minute was up, they were through the kitchens and into the stables. There was no sign of the woman.

“Seen your mum?” Brother Lu asked innocently as they

caught sight of the daughter playing at the back of the courtyard.

“Yeah, she's just popped out for a minute.”

“Now listen very carefully.” Brother Lu fixed the girl with his eyes. “We are leaving the town, do you understand?”

“Yes,” said the girl and she stood there with a glazed look in her eyes.

Just popped out, my foot, thought Ellie. She was on the way to see the skagrats.

They took the horses and led them out onto the street. They could see no sign of the woman.

“Do you think we can trust this Silas Troad fellow?” asked Bethany.

“That we'll have to find out,” said Brother Lu, and he wheeled his horse round and headed for the town hall at the west side of the square.

They tied their mounts up outside the town hall and went in. A skagrat sentry stopped them just inside the entrance. “What business do you have here?” he demanded, barring the way with his lance.

“We're here to see the mayor. Now, let us pass,” Brother Lu said, fixing him with his eyes. The sentry stepped backwards and, without a word, he let them pass.

Ellie looked at the bewildering array of signs on the wall, then she found one marked “Sanitation”. She presumed that was where they were really going.

“Are we really going to Dun-Hallow?” asked Olson. Of course they all knew that that garrison town had fallen to the Enemy.

“Like hell we are!” replied Brother Lu. “We're heading south-west for Alaram, not far north of the Dragon's Teeth.”

They reached the office at last. A nameplate on the door read “Silas Troad, Pest Control Manager.” Brother Lu went straight in without knocking and a rather bewildered looking man with a balding head looked up at them from his desk.

“Um ... yes?”

“I want to see Silas Troad – now!” snapped Brother Lu.

“You can't come barging straight in here like that ...”

“I'm a Representative,” Brother Lu replied and he went forward and gripped the man's hand in a peculiar fashion and

shook it.

“Ah ... I see – that kind of Representative. Well, that puts an entirely different complexion on matters. Will you share a pot of tea with me, perhaps? I can soon have Gladys make a fresh one. It's not often that we have the pleasure of such distinguished guests. I was only saying to Gladys the other day ...”

Brother Lu waved his hand in front of the man's face and cut him off in mid-flow. “You know of our mission. We have very urgent and pressing need of your help. There's no time for talk, let alone tea.”

“Ah.” The man sat back down at his desk.

“We were told you had further instructions for us.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed! They came the other day.” The man got to his feet and began to rummage through his filing cabinets. “Now, did Gladys file it under 'R' for Representative, I wonder? Or 'G' for Guardians? Or perhaps 'I' for Instructions.”

“Try 'E' for Elvenstone,” Ellie prompted, though why she should suddenly come out with this, she had no idea.

“May we have it, please? Our presence has been betrayed and the skagrats might be onto us even as I speak!” implored Brother Lu.

“All in good time, all in good time. First of all you must answer a riddle.”

“This is no time for jokes.”

“But I have to be sure of who you are. You see, the skagrats and their minions simply don't have a sense of humour or the lateral thinking abilities that are required to solve such things. They're far too serious and goal-orientated. It's actually quite a useful diagnostic test.”

Was he playing for time or was this really a test they had to undergo, wondered Ellie. Olson looked like he was ready to run the man through with his sword and steal the document, but she intervened.

“If you insist,” Olson said. “But you'd damn well better get on with it, or I'll slit you from your chin to your unmentionables!”

“Very well. Now who has the Elvenstone in their possession?”

Ellie stuck her hand up.

“May I see it?”

She hurriedly took out the silk purse and gave him a quick flash of the gleaming gem. The poor man nearly keeled over backwards at the sight.

“Um, very good,” he said and turned back to Ellie. “Now, tell me, as the official custodian of the Elvenstone: What goes 'ninety-nine – clomp, ninety-nine – clomp, ninety-nine – clomp?’”

“Oh, really!” Olson protested. “This is absolutely ridiculous.”

Ellie thought for a few moments. And then she had it, almost as if someone had popped the words into her head. “A centipede with a wooden leg!” she squealed.

The man visibly relaxed and he rummaged in his filing cabinet. “Ah, yes indeed. There it is, under 'E' for Elvenstone, as you say!” and brought out another letter, then sat back in his chair quite exhausted.

“Thanks a lot,” she called back, as they fair raced from the office and out of the building. “And – by the way – the skagrats are onto you, too! Megan at the inn is a collaborator.”

Just as they were on their way down the steps from the town hall, three skagrats were on their way up. Almost as a reflex reaction, Olson had his sword out and he'd lopped off one of their heads before they even registered the group's presence.

The remaining skagrats drew their swords and advanced, but at that very moment, Brother Lu drew his own scimitar and dived into them, slashing one right across the stomach and sending the other reeling. Elzabet had his bow at the ready now and an arrow fitted. He took aim and hit the third skagrat fairly and squarely between the eyes and he stood as if pole-axed for a moment, then went down on his back with a thump.

There were people about in the square and they let out a loud cheer as they saw the skagrats fall. But as it turned out, they were to pay a high price for this act of aggression. For every single skagrat that fell, the enemy hung, drew and quartered ten of the local inhabitants. It was a brutal policy, but it was one that worked.

24. The flight

On the way out of the town, Brother Lu again assumed his guise as a skagrat officer. There had been no time to re-tie the others' wrists and it was to be hoped that they could get out of the town in his charge without having to show travel permits.

"Hold it there!" called a sentry as they went to pass out of the town.

Brother Lu brought his horse back. "Yes, corporal? What is it? We have urgent business for Develin at Dun-Hallow, so you'd better make it quick."

"We're looking for a Free Lander, disguised as a slave-trader. He has three children with him ..." The skagrat had caught sight of Ellie, Bethany and Gareth. "...and a sylvan elf ..."

As the creature went for his scimitar, Brother Lu took his head clean off and spurred his horse on out of the town. They rode at full stretch for several leagues as if heading westwards toward Dun-Hallow and then they left the road and hid inside a disused farmhouse, just off the road.

As Brother Lu had thought, within minutes the skagrats were in pursuit and they saw a group of between sixteen and twenty riders ride past at a fast gallop. And then they were gone.

"Thank the Good Lord for that," said Brother Lu at last, heaving a great sigh of relief. "Time to move on."

They backtracked some distance, then wheeled round toward the south-west, their next stop Alaram.

It was only then that Ellie remembered that they hadn't read their latest instructions. What if they were to be sent to Dun-Hallow after all? Or if there were clues still to be found back at Dar-al-Azoth?"

"Why did you say Alaram?" asked Ellie.

"I can't say, really – it just popped into my head. I'm so used to communications reaching me in this way, that I went along with it."

Ellie slit the letter open and opened it, but it was a while before she spoke – it was a devil of a job trying to read at full gallop, but Brother Lu was not going to let them stop now. It

wouldn't be long before the skagrats realized they'd been duped, and this road was the next most obvious escape route.

The letter read simply:

Dear Fellow Wayfarers,

Beware of betrayal. Ride as fast as you can to your next destination. It is too dangerous for me to divulge it in this letter, but Brother Lu will be told by more direct means where to go next. When you reach that place, you will be expected and you will be further contacted.

I remain your humble servant,

Mortimus Finkle,

Secretary to the Council of the Free Lands.

So Brother Lu had been right – presumably by “direct means” they meant telepathically, and he'd taken it to be an intuition or some kind of divine inspiration.

But as for the warning about treachery, that had come a little late in the day. Still, she supposed that making predictions wasn't an exact science.

Ellie said nothing, but passed the note around.

“I just hold the pen, the Muse writes the story,” said Brother Lu, bringing his horse alongside. “When I am empty of self, my life is full of the Beloved. I'm truly grateful for the gifts with which I am daily showered.”

They travelled all day toward Alaram without stopping, though they had to greatly slacken their pace to let the animals catch their breath when they were sufficiently well clear of Dar-al-Azoth. As night drew in they found a stream where they could wash and fill their canteens with water and let the animals eat and drink their fill.

But there was a great sense of urgency in their mission now. Ellie's mind was so full of voices that it sounded more like Grand Central in her head. She even wondered if she might be having a breakdown with all the excitement of recent days. After a time they settled down and Ellie fell asleep. All night long her sleep was disturbed by dreams in which her progress was disrupted or frustrated in one way or another. She kept waking in a cold sweat and she couldn't get that phrase out of her head: “Beware of betrayal.” Did Finkle mean at Dar-al-Azoth, or did he have something else in mind?

All too soon, as usual, it was dawn and after a hasty and cold breakfast they were back on the road again. Olson had been scouting around and he came galloping back to the camp.

“What's up?” Gareth asked.

“I've just seen a dust cloud on the road. Way off in the distance, mind, but all the same, I believe we're being followed.”

Without further ado they got back into the saddle and they were galloping away again. “We should reach Alaram by sunset, if we hurry,” Brother Lu told them.

“Those ponies won't be able to keep up this kind of pace, you know,” advised Olson.

“I know,” Brother Lu agreed. “I've taken that into account.”

They rode all morning and in all that time they didn't see another skagrat. It would appear that the Enemy had not yet taken the south of the country but were concentrating on the north, using it as a bridgehead to push up into the Free Lands.

“They still with us?” asked Brother Lu. Olson had just been up on a ridge to survey the land.

“It looks that way.”

“Do you think they're gaining on us?”

“Little by little, but they're still a good way off.”

“And do you think we'll reach Alaram before they do?”

“Barring any unforeseen circumstances – and as long as the ponies don't slow up much more – I reckon so. If the town is still in the hands of the Azakstanis, they'll most likely turn back rather than risk a confrontation.”

And that's the way it was: they reached the southern town of Alaram shortly before sunset and, looking back, they could see no sign of pursuit. For the first time in days, as they rode into the city, their mounts snorting and steaming at the exertion, the party could afford to relax.

They found room for the night at the Wayfarers' Rest and, for once, they allowed the children a drink of watered-down spirits to celebrate and to give them a good night's sleep.

“Where are we going next?” asked Bethany. She was on her third drink of the evening and seemed a little tipsy, but maybe they all were? Ellie's eyes were beginning to go out of focus and she was seeing two of everything, so she politely declined the next drink in favour of a non-alcoholic lemonade.

“I'm not sure exactly where we go next,” said Brother Lu, between sips from his tankard of ale. Clearly, his monkish habit didn't stop him imbibing the amber nectar, as he fondly referred to it.

Olson had been thinking. “I think it's fair to assume that once we find the last fragment of the Elvenstone, we'll be heading straight for a place called Abshaur.”

“Of course, Brother Lu, you won't be familiar with the whole story,” said Ellie, and she began to recount the events as the story had unfolded. The man was absolutely fascinated by the saga.

Bethany took the little leather-bound book from her pocket and located the very first piece of parchment that they'd found and she passed it over to him:

*The realm is in turmoil
Lord Develin seeks power
If you want to save the day
You must leave within the hour.
Seek the Elvenstone
That was split in four
Bind it back together
And take it to Abshaur.*

“As I understand it,” said Olson, “Abshaur's meant to be somewhere near a place called Zalzabil, wherever that is.”

“Zalzabil? That's to the west of Azakstan in a land called Dungallan,” Brother Lu told them.

“And as far as I know, 'Abshaur' means waterfall, if that's of any use to you?” added Olson.

“I've only heard of the place, I've never been there,” said Brother Lu. “It's quite a legendary kind of place. There was meant to be a monastery there, though they do say that just prior to the First Great War, the treasures – the ark, as it was called – were removed from there and taken to some undisclosed location in the Free Lands. Whether the place is still a viable community, I really don't know, though this verse rather seems to imply that it's still inhabited.”

“As for the waterfall – the Guardians chose to site their settlements at places where the subtle energies – the Baraka – was, shall we say, enhanced. Waterfalls and mountainous terrain are locations particularly well suited to the storage, operation and

diffusion of these energies.”

Ellie was just returning to the bar, having been to the loo, when someone stopped her in the passageway and looked at her in a peculiar way. “Lost your way?” the man asked.

“Yes, actually, I do believe I have,” she said, quite without thinking.

The man smiled at her, thrust something into her hands and was off toward the gents before she noticed what it was. It was a very familiar-looking oiled-leather package and it was held together by a big red seal bearing a heraldic crest of some description inscribed in an octagon.

When the pupil is ready, the teacher finds him – or her – a voice seemed to say in her head. Well, I never!

She returned to the bar and explained what had happened, in a whisper, then handed the package over to Bethany. The girl broke away the red wax seal, unfolded the package and took out a piece of parchment. Brother Lu picked the seal up and examined it. “Those are the arms of the Guardians of the Secret,” he told her.

“I wonder why this particular package was sealed, though? All the rest have been open.” And then a strange thought occurred to her. Perhaps they hadn't been the first. Perhaps someone had followed the clues before but had replaced them, so that others could follow the trail? But that sounded too ridiculous to be true.

Or perhaps it was because the Guardians no longer trusted the Representatives? Maybe it was to stop them having a crafty peek? But why should they do that? What was the use of having one piece of the Elvenstone when she had three? Mind you, if Develin could get hold of one piece, that would somewhat thwart the Guardians' plans for it.

Whatever – all this was mere verbiage – verbal diarrhoea, as her father called it. The truth of such matters would no doubt come to light in its own good time.

“So what's it say?” Olson was anxious to know.

*Only the innocent shall
Pass through the Flame
Only the wise one shall
Know its True Name.*

The man she'd met in the corridor came up and sat down at

an adjacent table, just as a group of men came into the bar. He waited until they were past and out of earshot and then, pretending to lean back on the bench, he whispered in Ellie's ear without physically saying a word: "Shall we go?"

He was their contact. Ellie knew that Elzabet and Brother Lu had heard the man, too, but they said nothing.

The newcomers were being served at the bar and one by one they went to sit at the next table. Meanwhile their contact rose to his feet and offered the men the bench to sit on. Then he strolled casually back to the bar with his empty tankard and headed for the door. Ellie gave him a couple of minutes and then she and Brother Lu rose to their feet. Not quite sure of what was going on, but aware that something was afoot, the others got up, too, and they headed for the door, thanking the landlady on the way.

As soon as they were outside, their contact came up to them and anxiously walked them away from the inn and through a labyrinth of dark passages. "Watch the dog muck there," he warned them, just as Ellie was about to put her foot in it. She hopped over the mound and they continued on their way until she was thoroughly lost and disorientated.

At last they stopped by a wrought-iron gate and the man bowed them inside, across a yard and into a tiny house.

Only then did he speak. "That group of men in the bar ..."

"Yes, what of them?"

"They're trouble," he said, turning up the wick on the lanterns dotted around the room and offering them a seat. "Don't ask me why, but a seventh sense tells me that they're trouble."

Ellie would take his word for it. "Yes, now you come to mention it, I did feel slightly uncomfortable when they came in." That was the truth – she had had a peculiar sensation, but she'd dismissed the feeling almost as soon as it had arisen in her.

"You should trust your intuition more," Brother Lu told her. "With practise, it becomes an infallible guide." Then: "Hark at me talking – if I had a scruple for every time I've failed to act on my intuition over the years, I'd be a millionaire!"

"If I were you," said the man, "I wouldn't go back to the inn."

"But our animals and all our provisions are in there," Olson protested.

“I'm telling you, it really isn't safe. That's my advice – take it or leave it.”

“Anyhow, my Friend,” said Brother Lu – why have you brought us here?”

“First things first,” the man said and he got out seven glasses and a bottle and began to pour liberal measures into each glass.

“What is it?” Bethany wanted to know.

“It's a special liquor made from honey and oranges ...” the man said.

Ellie wasn't quite sure – she was still feeling a little squiffy after the drinks they'd had at the inn.

“... And it's come all the way from Abshaur monastery.”

Really. Well, that put a whole new complexion on it.

“Here's to your success my friends and Godspeed on your journey; and to absent Friends,” the man toasted and they all joined him. My, it was warm and fruity.

“And now,” the man said as they finished their drinks: “The *pièce de résistance!*”

The what?

“Follow me and I'll show you,” he said and he led them down a long flight of steep stairs into a cellar. It was stifling in there and the light seemed to flicker back and forth. Then they saw why: in the centre of the room was some kind of plinth and around the edges, a wall of great blue flames seemed to shoot up out of the floor. And beyond those flames, sitting atop the plinth, stood the last fragment of the precious Elvenstone.

How did the verse go? Bethany recited the verse out loud:

Only the innocent shall

Pass through the Flame

Only the wise one shall

Know its True Name.

“So who here is innocent enough to venture through those flames?” asked Olson. Well, certainly not him and probably not Gareth. Brother Lu? The man shook his head. Elzabet? The sylvan elf shook his head, too. We all have skeletons in our cupboards of one sort or another, a voice spoke inside her head.

Who then?

It has to be you.

But why me?

Because you are the Keeper.

But I'm just a naïve girl.

You have been chosen, the voice told her, and she could almost feel some invisible force pushing her a step closer to the fire. She stopped and looked around. Then she was another step closer.

Ellie took out the Elvenstone and held it in her hand, more for comfort than anything. If she should fail and be consumed in the flames, then these fragments, too, would remain within the circle of fire.

Yes, that was what she must do. If the worst came to the worst, the safety of the Elvenstone must be secured – even if it cost her her life.

She took a third step forward. One more step and she'd be in the flames.

Ellie took that step, already cringing against the intense heat.

And yet there wasn't any heat. The flames were cold. Were they real, or were they merely a phantasm, conjured-up as some kind of test?

She took a fifth step and stood inside the circle of flames, beside the plinth, the last remaining fragment of the Elvenstone within easy reach.

But what of the second part of the riddle?

How did the verse go?

That was it:

Only the innocent shall

Pass through the Flame

Only the wise one shall

Know its True Name.

Oh, dear Lord! Who was wise enough to know this true name? And the name for what exactly? The real name for the Elvenstone or for God or what?

Ellie was beginning to panic and as she did, so she could feel the flames gradually becoming hotter and hotter. She brought herself down and tried to concentrate on the breathing exercises and the mantra that Elzabet had taught her. That helped her nerves a little bit, but it didn't help her solve the riddle.

It looked like she was done for.

With a frog well and truly stuck in her throat, Ellie took the

large fragment of the Elvenstone that she had in her hand and laid it gently on the plinth. Instantly, drawn by the tremendous affinity that the fragments had for one-another, the smaller piece flew through the air and fused with the rest. One thing at least – now the Elvenstone was once more complete. Can you believe that? The Elvenstone is complete! In a way, it didn't matter what happened to her now. She'd played her part. Someone else, more wise and innocent than her could take up the proffered gauntlet now. She was just a drop in the ocean. She was nobody special – a nobody in relative terms and yet special all the same, if you could get your head round that concept.

Ellie cradled the Elvenstone for one last time. She was in love. This thing symbolized that Love. Not ordinary love – sure, that could act as a bridge to a greater Love – but Real Love itself. Higher Love. Nothing else really mattered any more.

25. The higher love

Ishk! A voice said in Ellie's head. The Higher Love is called Ishk!

Then she had it – the name of this thing was Ishk!

With that, the flames suddenly vanished and she found herself back upstairs in the living room with the others, only it wasn't a glass of liquor that she was clutching in her hand now – thanks be to God! – it was the completed Elvenstone! And the whole room was bathed in its wonderful, healing, fiery orange glow.

Brother Lu was up on his feet in an instant. “I know what we must do,” he said to the contact. “You must take the children to the gate whilst I go with Elzabet and Olson to get the horses.”

The man appeared about to protest, but he exchanged eye contact with Brother Lu and they came to an unspoken understanding. “Very well,” he said and he put his coat back on and ushered them to the door.

“You go down the alley to the end, then turn right onto ...”

“It's alright,” interjected Brother Lu with conviction. “I remember the way we came.”

Well, that was certainly more than Ellie could do. She'd have been lost before she even got to the end of the alley. And she couldn't help thinking that the further on she went, the more she found she still had to learn – or unlearn as the case may be.

“Follow me,” said the man and he hurried off with them running behind to keep up. They still didn't know his name – perhaps it was safer for all concerned if they did not?

When they arrived at the town gate, however, they found it barred and a sentry was there, sitting by the side of the road on guard duty.

“What are you doing out with these children at this time of night, old timer?” the sentry demanded. “They should be tucked up in bed now. I'd have thought someone of your age and social standing would have shown a bit more consideration and a better example.”

The man walked over to the sentry and tapped him lightly on

his right shoulder. In an instant, the soldier's shoulders drooped and he fell fast asleep. "Works a treat, even if I do say so myself," said the old man. "Absolutely never fails."

Then he turned back to Ellie. "The name's Mort, by the way. Short for Mortimer. Now listen very carefully. Your lives will be in grave peril now that you have the Elvenstone complete. I doubt there's a wayward soul in the whole of the Free Lands who wouldn't give his eye-teeth to get hold of the gem. You know, I've a good mind to go with you ... ah, but I've left my horse back at the house. Now that was rather foolish of me.

"Do you know where you're going now?" he asked.

"Abshaur," Bethany told him. "It's meant to be near Zalzabil in Dungallan."

"Yes," he said. "The Guardians used to have a power house there, though I was under the impression that it had fallen into disuse. Perhaps it was only in abeyance – laying dormant, as it were? I'm told the Guardians have had something of an interregnum. Times change, you know, and with it so does the Necessity."

"What's an interregnum?" asked Gareth.

"The time between the cessation of one government or reign and the establishment of the next," replied Bethany, the walking dictionary.

They seemed to be waiting at the gates for an age – and still the sentry slept on – when Olson appeared, riding at a fair lick, with their ponies running on a length of rope behind. He jumped down from his horse and unhitched the ponies.

"Big trouble!" he panted. And even as he said the words, Ellie could feel the Elvenstone glowing brightly and hotly in her pocket. She exchanged worried glances with Mort.

"Where are the others?" Mort wanted to know.

"They've been taken. I was still in the stables and I managed to slip away. You were right. The men from the inn ambushed us. We must be away – they'll be following us soon."

"Really?" Mort looked most disturbed. "Godspeed, my friends!" he said and he dashed back up the street whilst Olson struggled to unbolt the gate. Then they were away into the night, riding full pelt for the border along the road to the west.

Heaven only knew how they'd find Abshaur without Brother

Lu, but find it they had to – and quickly at that.

All through the night they rode, until the ponies could take no more, then they made camp and chanced a fire so that they could have a fry-up and a brew of revitalizing tea. With luck, if they were to be followed, the pursuit would not start before the next day.

Olson woke at dawn, presumably, to find them gone, because alas their time in DreamScape had just expired.

Ellie shot up in bed, sweating from head to toe – as if she'd been out sprinting. She fumbled for her watch, illuminated the dial and peered at the time.

Four thirty. There was still time to complete the last leg of the quest before she had to get up. She could only hope that the others would have the sense to set their wristpads, too.

She flipped through the menus and selected “Resume”, then hit the little green “Go” button and lay back down again, but she was so excited by recent events that she could not get back to sleep – and it was already getting light.

26. Capture

The last thing Brother Lu remembered was being struck on the back of the head from behind, seeing a great flash of stars and falling. When he awoke, he found himself tied to a chair in a darkened room with Elzabet.

There were others in the room, standing over them, but it was difficult to make out their features because there was a dazzling storm lantern hung from the low ceiling within inches of his face and the room was heavy with acrid pipe smoke.

“Ah, the sleepers awake!” one of the men laughed and came closer. Brother Lu recognized him as one of the men who had come into the Wayfarers' Rest shortly before they'd left.

“I'll cut straight to the chase,” the man said, thrusting his face right up to Brother Lu's, so close that he could not focus his eyes on the man and he could smell the stench of garlic. “We know that you have the Elvenstone.”

“We do not,” replied Brother Lu.

“One of you has. Where are the others who were with you at the inn? The old man; the children; the officer?”

That was a piece of good fortune – Olson must have made his escape. With his help, the children had a chance of making it to Dungallan.

“They can't have vanished into thin air, now can they? Where were they heading?”

Brother Lu said nothing.

“Obstinate type, eh?”

Without warning, the man struck Brother Lu across the face.

The blow hurt, of course, but they'd have to do a lot better than that before they got him to divulge any information. He glanced at Elzabet. The elf looked pretty frightened by the experience.

“Where were the others heading?” the man demanded, striking him a second time.

Brother Lu still said nothing.

“Looks like we've got one of those strong and silent types here, Van. See what you can do to loosen him up for me, will

you?”

The first man stepped away and Van stepped forward. He reached over to a small table beside Brother Lu and he produced a small metal object. Then the man grabbed hold of his hand and rammed the contraption over his thumb.

Van turned a wheel on the device and Brother Lu could feel the thing tighten around his thumb.

“I don't like these thumb screws – messy things,” said the first man, coming forward. “Now, I'll ask you once again, and you could save yourself so much pain and injury if you were to give me the answer – where are the others heading?”

When he received no reply, the first man nodded and Van gave the device another turn. A terrible pain shot through Brother Lu's body and he let out an involuntary cry. But it would take a lot more than that to get him to divulge the others' intentions.

“Sir, sir!” piped up Elzabet.

“Yes?” The first man's attention turned to the sylvan elf. “Have you something to say?”

Brother Lu exchanged furtive glances with the elf.

“It is nothing,” the elf said and he sank back in the chair.

The man nodded again and as Van turned the screw still further, he let out a long, anguished cry.

“Sir, sir!” Elzabet yelped again.

“Don't tell them anything, Elzabet!” Brother Lu snapped.

“Now is not being the time for heroics, Brother Lu,” said Elzabet.

“So you do have something to say!” the first man said, and he grabbed Elzabet by the throat and forced his head back. “Come on, I haven't got all night. Spit it out!”

“I am sorry, Brother Lu ...” Elzabet said. Then the very frightened-looking elf looked the first man in the eye. “The honourable Captain Olson and the children will to the Dragon's Teeth be going.”

The Dragon's Teeth was a range of mountains to the south of Azakstan.

“That's a lot better,” the man said. “Your little elfen friend has sense, Brother Lu.

“Now, where tell us a little more precisely the route they'll be taking.”

“I'm saying nothing,” Brother Lu feigned.

“Not even if I shoved a red-hot poker up your little friend's left nostril?” he asked and he strode across the room and thrust something deep into the flames of the fire. Then the man waited, until the thing was sufficiently hot. And when it was, he strode back across the room and held it within inches of Elzabet's face.

“Alright, alright!” Brother Lu said, letting out a deep breath of resignation. “There's a system of caves through the mountains. They're heading for Orodil, the other side of the range. They're to meet Representatives of the Guardians of the Secret there.”

“Now we're getting somewhere. But how do we find these caves?” the man asked.

“You won't,” replied Brother Lu. “You'll need a guide.”

The man thought for a minute. “You know the way?”

“If memory serves me correctly, yes. But you must set my friend free. He's done you no harm and he's of no further use to you.”

“No. The elf goes along to keep you sweet, Brother Lu. You shall be our guide. Let's grab some sleep, men – we ride at dawn.”

27. Dungallan

The more Ellie tried to sleep, the more awake she became, and in the end she just lay there and tried to practise her breathing exercises and picture some tranquil scene in her head, like the cottage garden at Elvenglade. Eventually she drifted off, but it had taken Ellie a good hour before she fell asleep once more.

When she suddenly reappeared at the camp, she gave Olson quite a shock. Indeed he had awoken to find them gone, and was presumably bemused by the fact that their packs and their ponies were still there.

“What are you doing?” Ellie asked, finding the man rummaging through their belongings.

Olson spun round. “Oh, there you are!” he gasped with relief. “You don't know how worried I was to see you gone. I was looking to see if you'd left a note. But where are the others – Bethany and Gareth?”

“Oh, I expect they'll be along shortly,” Ellie replied.

Quite serendipitously, the others suddenly appeared, a little way off, behind the man. “Ah, there they are,” Ellie lilted, peering over Olson's shoulder. “Hiya!”

But Ellie's smile soon faded as she remembered that Elzabet and Brother Lu were missing; and she tortured herself, imagining the many fates that might have befallen them at Alaram. They might be held captive – tortured – wounded – even dead, for all she knew, and there was nothing they could do about it. They couldn't really go back to find the friends – and even if they did, chances were they'd be taken captive, too, and the Elvenstone would be lost. Above all else, and despite personal qualms, they had an overriding duty to return the fabulous gem to the Guardians at Abshaur.

Olson poured the remains of the kettle over the still-smouldering embers of the fire and they broke camp and headed westwards. It was midday by the time they reached the town of Ang-Alen, and they were relieved to find that the town had not fallen to the skagrats. They did not stay there, however. They dallied only long enough for Olson to scout around behind them

to be sure that they were not being followed, and to check at the town gatehouse that they were on the right road for Dungallan.

A little way out of the town, however, Olson became worried that Bethany's pony might be going a little lame. Ellie took out the Elvenstone and ran it up and down the animal's hind leg, but it didn't seem to make much difference, so Olson had Bethany ride behind him on his horse and they slackened their pace somewhat.

Late in the afternoon, they passed through a hamlet and they stopped once more to water their animals at a horse trough. Ellie took the opportunity to try to affect a cure for Bethany's pony, and as she was massaging the leg she felt something rough rub across her palm. Then she had it – it was a thorn from some prickly plant. The animal was quite distressed and she had to enlist the help of Olson to hold its hind leg, but finally she managed to dig the thorn out of the pony's hide. The leg had become quite inflamed by now and Ellie ran the Elvenstone up and down the affected limb to try to calm down the wound. And then they were off again.

By sunset, however, the three of them and their animals were so exhausted that they could simply go no further and so again they made camp. If there were skagrats around? Well, that would have been just too bad, for once they'd eaten, they more or less fell sleep where they'd been sitting – and this time they slept clear through the night. And it was a good job, too, for Olson was worried that they might be being followed and he had them ride all through the day and right through the next night until finally they were over the border into Dungallan and had reached Zalzabil. It would have taken a band of very determined folk to have kept pace with them on that gruelling leg of the journey.

28. The dragon's teeth

Brother Lu and Elzabet awoke the next morning to anxious shouting from the street and the sound of distant gunfire. Van dashed into the room, sword in hand, and he slashed the cords binding the two of them and ran them at sword-point out of the house and into the street. Their captors were already waiting for them and they had horses waiting. Outside, the town was in pandemonium.

“What's going on?” asked Brother Lu.

“The skagrats are here – they've come to take the town,” someone screamed, running up the road.

“Hurry, Van! We have no time to waste!”

At his master's bidding, Van searched in his saddle-bags and brought out some chains and, once they were astride the spare horses, he manacled their hands.

And then they were off down the town. There were skagrat troops swarming around the fortress nearby, but they kept their heads down and they hared off down the road to the south-west, away from the battlefield.

Brother Lu was just biding his time as they rode. It was imperative that their captors believed that the others had taken the caves through the Dragon's Teeth – or at least that he and Elzabet bought them a little more time. Every moment they could buy Ellie was one step closer to freedom at Abshaur for her. And a giant leap closer to ultimate victory over Develin and the Dark Forces.

“There you are,” he said at last, as they came to the foot of the mountains. He pointed to a path zigzagging up the northern slope toward a high plateau.

He led the way as they climbed up to the path, walking his horse as slowly as he dare without arousing their captors' suspicions. It was quite a perilous route, so fortunately the men were too scared for their own sakes to take notice of his ploy.

Finally, they were up onto the plateau and they crossed it with ease.

“But this is a dead end,” one of the men protested.

“Hey, trust me, guys!” Brother Lu told them, and he led them right across to the far end of the plateau. Only then could they see the entrance to the caves, hidden by a huge fallen boulder. While they were distracted, he wheeled his horse round, muttered something under his breath and raised his manacled hands toward Elzabet.

The sylvan elf caught sight of him and he flattened himself against the horse, thinking that Brother Lu was about to cast a lightning bolt his way.

In that instant, the sylvan elf was suddenly transformed into an eagle and the manacles slipped from its claws. “Away!” Brother Lu shouted and the bird took to the air.

The men wheeled their horses round now and faced Brother Lu. They could not make out what had happened to the elf, but they realized that he'd somehow slipped the manacles and stolen away and they were not going to let Brother Lu escape as well.

Just as they were about to take hold of him, however, he shape changed and at the last second he, too, flew out of their hands and away into the sky.

Whether the men took to the caves after all, or whether they realized the subterfuge and took the road to the east, it didn't really matter. Bethany would be well on her way by now and the men had little hope of catching up.

29. Zalzabil

Bethany was amazed by the architecture at Zalzabil: it was almost like something out of a fairytale. Sure, many of the houses were only very small and they seemed to have been laid out in a very higgledy-piggledy fashion with no thought of town planning. But there were others that looked like miniature fortresses in their own right, with crenellated walls and pointed towers, and there were other buildings with walls in elaborately designed ceramic mosaics, with gracefully curved arches and with sweeping domes that shone so brightly you'd have thought them lined with gold. The place was a riot of colour, and the people, too. It was as though all the cultures of the world had come together in this cosmopolitan town.

They had enquired at the town gatehouse where a monastery called Abshaur might be, but the sentry had never heard of it, so it looked like they'd have to ask in the town.

All Gareth wanted to do was sleep, and Ellie could hardly blame him. "Can't we find a room at an inn so we can get some rest?" she enquired of Olson on Gareth's behalf.

"No," said the man. "We'll make camp once we're out of the city and you can snatch forty winks then. With luck, we'll be at Abshaur soon and there you will be able to sleep for as long as you like, in perfect safety."

Olson accosted an old man in the street. "I say, my man: could you tell me where Abshaur is?"

"A waterfall? But there are so many in the area," he shrugged.

"There's meant to be a monastery there."

"No, sorry – 'fraid I can't help you there, mate."

Wherever they went and whomever they asked, the answer was the same. It was almost as if the place didn't exist at all – at least as far as the population of Zalzabil were concerned.

And then a second man suggested that they might try a match-seller who plied his meagre trade in the town square. Apparently he was reputed to be as old as the hills, and if anyone could remember a place of that name, it would be him. And so

that's where the way they headed – it was the warmest lead they'd been able to find thus far, so the man was worth a try.

They found the man soon enough. He stank to high heaven and he was surrounded by flies.

“Genhuine Lucifers!” the man called. “Getchor genhuine Lucifers 'ere. On'y two niggits a pack!”

“What's a 'niggit'?” asked Gareth.

Bethany was having a look in the tray which the old man had strung around his neck and she came back. “I think that must be the currency they use around here,” she reported.

Ellie took a deep breath and walked up to the man. “Excuse me, sir, but we're looking for a place called Abshaur.”

The man merely raised his eyebrows and looked at her. By now she'd come to read those signs like a book and she picked up a box of matches. “How much?” she asked. “Three niggits to you, my dear,” he said.

She fished in her purse. “I only have scruples,” she told him and held some out in her hand.

He picked one up and looked at it disdainfully. “Neither use nor ornament, those,” he told her and threw it back in her palm.

Ellie fished out some silver coins.

“Nah, use to neither man nor beast,” he said.

She put the silver coins away and took out a Noble.

That was different. He took the coin and bit the edge, then examined it. It wasn't a coin of the realm, but presumably the old man knew gold when he saw it, and that was a universal currency – and, apparently, a universal lubricant: “Why, there's loadsa waterfalls around these parts, me dear. Did you have any in mind particular like?”

Again the man raised his eyebrows and gave her that look, the look that said it all – two wives on his back and seven hungry mouths to feed, and all that malarkey.

She fished out another Noble and he snatched out his hand.

“It's said that there's a monastery there.”

“Plenty of monasteries round and about, too,” the old man told her.

“It's run by the Guardians of the Secret – so they say.”

At these words, the old man nearly scattered the contents of his little tray and he anxiously drew them away from the crowds

and into a secluded corner beside one of the market stalls.

Ellie stared at the man and he returned her gaze. As she looked, she saw his features change repeatedly. Perhaps she was beginning to hallucinate through lack of sleep? But surely, this must be Keetch, the bookseller? No, she thought, it's the man who'd shown her the riddle about the key. Or the Colonel – what was his name? – Olrek Frobisher-Kleinhosen? She turned away and shook her head. Maybe a good stiff drink at the nearest tavern might be in order at this particular juncture?

“What's black and white and red all over?” said the man abruptly, or at least that's what she thought he'd said.

She didn't see his lips move.

The answer came to her with equal mystery.

What's black and white and red all over?

Why a newspaper, of course!

Ellie knew the old man had heard her and yet Bethany, Gareth and Olson seemed utterly oblivious to the silent conversation that was going on. She was worried that the man might ask to see the Elvenstone, as she was reluctant to expose it to public view, but thankfully he did not.

“Follow the road five leagues west,” the old man said at length. “That's as near as I can lead you. After that, just follow your feet – the Elvenstone will know where to find its Masters.”

30. The magic monastery

So they took the road to the west. Gareth began to complain that they still hadn't had the rest which Olson had promised them, and Ellie couldn't really blame him, but Olson wasn't having any of it. If anything, as the journey progressed, he was getting stronger and stronger, whilst they were growing ever weaker.

"My friends," he cajoled them, "we're no more than five teensy-weensy leagues from our destination. We'll be there in less than one hour. Surely you can hang on for a little longer?"

"Well, I reckon this must be about it," announced Olson, as he finally pulled his horse up.

"Thank God for that," said Gareth, and he slipped down from the side of his pony and lay flat out in the long grass.

"It's up to you now, Ellie," Olson said to her, allowing himself the brief freedom of a short stroll around. Like it or not, she had to admire the man – he hadn't once requested that they do anything that he wasn't willing to do himself. And he'd probably saved their hides a time or two along the way.

Ellie was highly excited. Her head was again full of thoughts and distant voices – most likely it was the lack of sleep. It was said that such deprivation was sufficient to send the most stable person temporarily insane. She took several deep breaths to calm her nerves and slow her thumping heart and took the Elvenstone from its silken purse. It was shining as brightly as ever – and yet still it had a slightly ruddy glow to it.

Even here, apparently, they were not entirely safe and she looked around her nervously. All they could see from this relative vantage point, for miles around, were hills and valleys. Abshaur could be anywhere and they couldn't hope to explore each of the valleys in turn: it would take an age. And even then, they couldn't be sure that they'd find the place. The place was sure to be hidden from view, somewhere off the beaten track. Why she should think this, she wasn't sure, but that was nevertheless her impression, and she was coming to trust in her intuition more and more these days.

Her intuition told her, for example, that she should hold the

Elvenstone out in front of her and turn round slowly in a circle, and this is what she did. She thought she had a feeling, but it passed. So she closed her eyes and cleared her mind and repeatedly the exercise. And then she could almost feel her feet ever-so-subtly tugging at her.

Ellie opened her eyes and pointed up one of the valleys. "Let's try up here," she said. Certainly, it looked vaguely hopeful: there was a stream flowing swiftly down the valley. That was a start. Without water, there could be no waterfall. That was it – they should follow the stream toward its source. And then they came to a fork, where two streams converged. But should they take the left fork or the right? She couldn't tell, sitting astride her pony, so she got back down. Yes, it was better if her feet were on the ground. Ellie was more – more what? – more connected with the place, yes that was it. She could almost imagine the inhabitants walking up this valley toward their monastery and she tried to place herself in their shoes and walk the way they did.

Ellie began to hear a rushing sound. As they walked along, it was quite distant at first; but as they came closer, it became louder and louder until a deafening roar filled the high valley.

Well, there was indeed a high waterfall ahead of them, at the end of the valley, but she could see no signs of habitation, not even the odd farmhouse.

"It's a dead end," Olson sighed, and he turned his horse about. "Let's try the other fork."

Ellie followed reluctantly and feeling more than a little deflated. She'd been so sure that she was on the right path. My, how awry one could go listening to one's own wishful thinking. She wasn't really cut out for this lark, after all. What was it? – she'd reached the level of her incompetence. But if she couldn't find Abshaur, then who else could? It was almost as if you had to have an invitation to visit the place – and if not, then you hadn't a cat in hell's chance of finding it. It was that sort of a place; like it had some kind of benign enchantment over it.

She turned to walk her horse away after Olson and the others, but something seemed to be pulling her back. "Wait up!" she bellowed at Olson and, turning her horse around again and getting back in the saddle, she rode right up to the end of the valley and around the lake to stand beside the waterfall.

Her reason told her that there was nothing here for her, and yet another part of her was crying out – “It's here! It's here! Open your blessed eyes, girl!”

Ellie rubbed her eyes and looked around, and she was not altogether surprised to find that the magic monastery had not suddenly appeared.

She got down off her horse and sat down on a rock beside the waterfall, looking out over the lake. Sod Olson, she was going to take a few moments out to enjoy the place. The air felt so wonderful here; the water was so clear; even her head was beginning to clear in the cool spray from the falls. My, this was the life.

“For heaven's sake, come on!” snapped Olson, himself a little tetchy with lack of sleep, she observed.

Ellie reluctantly got up and went back to her pony. And then, as she looked down to put her foot in the stirrup, she noticed something rather odd. There was a set of footprints leading away from the lakeside toward the very edge of the waterfall. Her heart skipped a beat and she grabbed the reins of the pony and walked straight in under the curtain of water.

And when she emerged through the other side, she was not entirely surprised to find herself standing in the entrance of a long, dark tunnel where, presumably, the water had once run. She held the Elvenstone up in front of her to light the way and, without waiting for the others, she began to walk down the long tunnel. A little further in, she noticed a spot of light in the distance, and as she walked closer, so the little spot of light became bigger and bigger and eventually she found herself out the other side. She emerged to find herself looking down over a secluded valley that you simply wouldn't know was there at all.

Looking over the valley, Ellie was struck by how lush and well-managed it was. This had to be the Garden of Dungallan. There were little farmhouses dotted about here and there, and in the distance there was what looked like a village, dominated by a huge complex of large buildings which appeared to stand in there own grounds. She knew then that this complex must be the monastery they'd been told about and, without further delay, she was off down the zigzagging dirt track and heading towards it.

Behind her, Olson and the others had finally figured out what

she'd been up to when she didn't emerge from the waterfall, and they came galloping down the track to catch up with her.

“What an astounding place!” Bethany exclaimed.

All along the way there were people coming across the fields to greet them with great interest and warmth. And as they passed slowly through the village, folk would turn and wave and come out of their houses to bid them welcome.

Finally, they were through the village and clomping up a cobbled road toward the monastery. There was a gate ahead of them and two sentries dressed in blue hooded robes moved out into the road and barred the way.

“Hello,” said Ellie.

“A thousand greetings to you, travellers,” one of the sentries said. “What is it you want here?”

“I have the Elvenstone,” Ellie told them, “and I must see the Guardians immediately.”

The sentries didn't seem quite sure about this, and then one of them suddenly changed his mind, as if he'd just received orders over an intercom and he went to open the great gates for them.

“Thank you,” Ellie said.

“You're welcome,” came back the reply.

They dismounted respectfully and walked their horses under the low archway and through the most exquisitely-managed, formal gardens and wonderful, decorative fountains. The air was laden with the delicate, fragrant aromas of a myriad exotic flowering plants that Ellie had never seen before in her life.

As they neared the end of the gardens, they were met by several more of the robed figures and their animals were led away to be stabled whilst still others came out to guide them up the marble steps and into the main building of the monastery. Ellie wasn't quite sure whether she should remove her hat as a sign of respect, but in the end she decided she should keep her head covered. Gareth didn't seem to care one way or the other – he just seemed to float along with the others in a daze.

At the entrance, they were relieved of their packs and also of any weaponry of whatever description. Olson seemed a little put out by this, since his sword was a symbol of his status in the army of the Free Lands, but he handed it over without too much loss of dignity.

They entered an immense foyer with marble floor, walls, ornate columns and ceiling. It was hard to believe that you could get so much of this precious stone out of the earth in such huge pieces. And again, expertly laid into the centre of the floor, Ellie could see the octagon and the heraldic arms of the Guardians of the Secret.

As they passed through the foyer, a woman in a blue and gold hooded robe came forward to greet them. “So, you made it at last,” she enthused. “I’m Bel-Az. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your rooms. You can freshen up a bit and have an hour or so’s rest. You must be tired after your long journey.

“Then, whenever you’re ready, just come down and find me. There’s no rush – we have all the time in the world.”

Ellie had never before enjoyed a hot bath so much as she did that day. She laid back and relaxed and let all her cares float away. And then, after perhaps half an hour in the luxuriant bubbly water, she got dried and dressed and went to lay down for a few minutes on the soft, fleecy sheepskin draped over her bed.

She had just got off into a blissful sleep when there was a loud rapping and Olson popped his head round the door. “Rise and shine, Ellie: we still have work to do, remember?”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” she groaned. She felt more tired now that she had done before she’d put her head on the pillow. “Can’t it wait for a few more minutes?”

“No, Ellie – this is far too important. It can’t wait. The fate of the people still hangs in the balance, and you can tip things in our favour. We mustn’t keep the Guardians waiting.”

Whatever happened to “There’s no rush – you have all the time in the world”, eh? Was that all she was – a puppet to be jerked around?

“Alright, alright!” she huffed and she clambered off the bed and followed the man out of the room. Bethany and Gareth were waiting and they didn’t appear too chuffed, either.

They trudged down the long, gracefully sweeping staircase to the foyer and Olson strode across to Bel-Az. “Ready so soon?” she asked, and she seemed to be able to sense the disharmony emanating from them. It was almost as if a dog had fallen into a pool of rose water and had fouled it.

“We’d like to see the Director,” Olson requested.

“But wouldn't you rather eat first?” asked Bel-Az, looking at the children.

“It's urgent,” Olson insisted.

“Um ... very well. If you'll follow me, I'll see if Mazog is available.”

So they followed her out of the foyer and along a long corridor hung with the richest tapestries, until she came to the room at the very end. There was a sentry posted outside the door. She knocked.

“Sorry, Sister,” spoke up the sentry, “but if it's the Director you're after, she's out for a stroll in the rose garden.”

“Thank you,” said Bel-Az and she spun on her heel. “This way, if you please,” and she led them back to the foyer and out the front door.

They found the Director sitting beside a lily-pond, feeding the goldfish. “Yes?” she asked, seeing Bel-Az walking towards her, then she saw the others. “Ah, and you must be the trusty adventurers? I hope that our hospitality meets your expectations?”

“Much more,” smiled Ellie.

“So, I understand that you've managed to recover all four pieces of the Elvenstone, am I right?”

“Yes, indeed,” beamed Ellie and she fished in her pocket for the gem and waved it in the air. She handed it to the Director who examined it with great interest. “My word,” she said: “it's every bit as wonderful as I'd been led to believe. And back in our possession after such a long time ...”

The Director handed the stone back to Ellie. “You brought it here – you hold onto it for now, until tonight's big presentation.”

“May I have a hold of it before you give it away?” enquired Olson.

“Sure.”

Ellie was on the very brink of handing the Elvenstone over when an eagle swooped down out of the nearby trees and caught Olson a glancing blow on the side of the face, bringing blood, before flying off.

Olson had his hands up, covering his face.

“Here, let me have a look,” said Ellie in concern.

“It's nothing – it's just a scratch,” Olson said, looking all around him for signs of the great bird. It couldn't have simply

vanished into thin air.

And then Ellie noticed a strange thing – the blood flowing from the gash in Olson's face wasn't red – it was green.

“But ...”

Olson flashed his eyes at her, looked down at the blood on his hand and turned on her. Ellie leapt out of the way. Without warning, Olson's whole demeanour had changed; even his features. It wasn't Olson's eyes that she was looking into now, but those of someone almost too hideous for words. Those terrible, black, blood-shot, whirlpool eyes were not Olson's but Develin's.

Ellie took an involuntary step backwards and tripped over the edge of the lily-pond. She picked herself up and backed away still further as the dark figure advanced on her.

“Stay back!” she commanded, holding the Elvenstone up in front of her. But the creature did not even flinch. Now the Director muttered something under her breath and pointed her arm at Develin. There was a flash and a mighty crack like thunder and Develin swayed a little as a fire-bolt hit him, but he lashed out with his arm and the woman went sprawling.

“Guards!” she screamed at the top of her voice and within seconds, two soldiers came running down the garden toward them.

But Develin simply clicked his fingers and a long staff appeared in his hand. He pointed it at the advancing soldiers, cried “Az-Dadib!” and there was a frightful explosion. The two men were catapulted through the air and lay motionless amidst the rose bushes.

“You really don't know who you're dealing with here, do you?” Develin snarled, looking first at the prone Director and then toward Ellie, Bethany and Gareth.

Gareth had his wand out now and he pointed it at Develin, but as he did so, the wand began to glow and caught fire and he dropped it, squealing out and holding his burnt hand.

Out of the blue, the eagle came swooping down again and then Ellie spotted another one alighting a little further down the path. The next time she looked, Ellie saw Brother Lu and Elzabet standing there. Develin hadn't noticed them yet.

No sooner was the thought formed on Ellie's lips than Develin turned to face these new aggressors.

“Well, well, if it isn't Brother Lu and that sad sylvan elf Elzabet!” he laughed. “You've made it here after all.”

“No thanks to you, Develin!”

“Come to watch your friends die, have you?”

“No, we've come to bring you to swift justice.”

Develin wielded his staff over his head and cast a huge fireball in their direction. Elzabet was knocked off his feet and lay there, but Brother Lu summoned up a staff of his own and parried the blow. The fireball flew through the air back toward Develin. The creature neatly side-stepped and it went crashing into the bushes and set them on fire.

“You'll have to do better than that!” spat Develin.

“Likewise!” retorted Brother Lu.

Without warning, Brother Lu shape changed and a powerful tiger bore down on Develin and prepared to leap at his throat.

Develin transformed himself into an elephant at the last minute and the tiger yelped as the elephant tossed it in the air with its long tusks.

Next second, a tiny mouse raced over toward the elephant and the animal reared up in terror. But then Develin turned from an elephant into a cat and it pounced on the helpless mouse, raking it with its claws.

The mouse slipped between the cat's legs and turned once more into a great golden eagle and it took to the sky, wheeled round and dived straight for the cat, catching hold of it in its powerful talons.

Suddenly, Develin transformed himself into a bear and the eagle plummeted to the ground under the immense weight.

Then Brother Lu was back to his own self and lay there on the ground, stunned and bleeding. Develin, too, turned back to his former self and the creature walked over and stood there over Brother Lu, preparing to dispatch him from this world with a blow to the head from his sturdy staff.

Ellie caught Brother Lu's eye and she threw the Elvenstone to him. He reached out his arm and caught the stone.

“Develin!” Ellie called and managed to divert his attention for a brief moment.

And in that moment, summoning up the last of his energy, Brother Lu lunged upward and caught the creature a swingeing

blow in the pit of its stomach. Develin fell backwards, fighting for his breath. Then Brother Lu held the Elvenstone aloft, muttered some words and sent an immense blast of raw energy in Develin's direction. There was a mighty crack of thunder which made the ground under their feet shake, and then Develin was gone. He had simply vanished into thin air.

Ellie ran forward to Brother Lu and took the Elvenstone from his hand. She ran it over his face where he'd been so badly gashed and down his wounded arm, and mercifully the wounds began to heal. With Develin out of the way, the Elvenstone seemed even more potent. Or perhaps it was that she was an even more potent healer wielding the Elvenstone than she had been with Develin around? The stone shone a bright green now, almost for the first time, and she realized that all along it had been warning her that something was amiss, but she'd chosen to disregard that warning.

Elzabet was on his feet now. He was hurting and he was bruised and she ran the Elvenstone up and down his spine. The sylvan elf would soon mend. And within moments of touching the gem to Gareth's hand, his burns were healed. Alas, however, there was nothing they could do for the two dead soldiers but pay their respects and pray. "Fear not, they've gone to a better place," Brother Lu told her.

"How can I ever repay you?" smiled the Director as they walked back through the gardens toward the main building.

"The pleasure of restoring the Elvenstone to the Guardians is payment enough," beamed Ellie.

31. The grand rite

Mazog led them back down into the gardens later that evening to join the growing crowd of spectators. There was to be a great procession that evening and they had been granted the honour of taking part.

The Director left them with Bel-Az whom they'd met earlier and they waited for the event to begin.

As the light faded, they saw a long procession of people bearing flaming torches walking in step toward them from the main building. The Director was at the head of the procession in her hooded green robes and she was flanked by two men carrying banners bearing the heraldic arms of the Order and other arcane symbols. Following the instructions they'd been given, Ellie and her fellow wayfarers stepped out nervously into their path and as the Director came close to her, the long line of figures came to a halt. The Director came forward now and ceremoniously dressed them all in robes of blue and gold.

Then, flanked by the two standard bearers, the adventurers and the Director walked back up between the two rows of people bearing the flaming torches. When they reached the end of the line, they all followed her and the Director back inside the main building, across the foyer and into a large audience hall.

The Director and Ellie stationed themselves in the centre of the hall on either side of a column perhaps four feet in height, with Bethany, Gareth, Elzabet and Brother Lu close at-hand, whilst the others, including the spectators, formed a wide circle around them.

Her hands trembling with nerves, Ellie took the Elvenstone out of her pocket and held it up high for all to see. There were gasps as the bright green light emanating from the gem lit up the whole hall. Then the Director went across and clasped her hands around Ellie's and between them they placed the Elvenstone in the cupped receptacle in the centre of the column. They embraced for a few moments and then they stood back and bowed toward the gleaming gem.

"There, the great deed is finally done," the Director smiled

with satisfaction.

And with that, the circle broke up. There were people hurrying about all over the place bringing in tables and chairs and beautifully embroidered tablecloths. Once the tables were in place, still others set out the places with plates and goblets of solid gold and cutlery of the finest silver.

The Director clapped her hands and they all took their places, with Mazog in the middle and the adventurers on either side and opposite her, as a small army of waiters came in bearing platters of food and great jugs full of drink. When they'd given their thanks to God for this fine fare, they helped themselves to the food. Ellie had a sip of the drink. It was the same liquor made from honey and oranges that Mort had toasted them with at Alaram. He'd said the drink was brewed at Abshaur.

"The liquor has some very special qualities," the Director told her. "Great care and dedication is taken at every stage of its production – and its consumption – here. It is imbued with the subtle energy, the Baraka, with which this place Abshaur and the Elvenstone are suffused. Only a very, very few of the many folk who drink it have any inkling of this, however. They just think it a pleasant drink."

"So what do we do, now that the Elvenstone has been restored?" asked Ellie.

"You may stay here, if you wish, and restore your health. Develin certainly put you through it, by all accounts."

"The paradoxical thing, Mazog, is that without Develin's help, posing as Captain Olson, we wouldn't have made it this far."

"You might like to know that that wasn't Captain Olson," the Director told her. "The real Olson was captured after you left the caves. I understand he went to scout the area. Develin took his place ..."

"How do you know that?" asked Bethany.

"He escaped from his captors and went back to the king to tell him what had happened."

That was great news.

"Then people have known all along that Develin was with us?"

"We didn't find out until later."

"But you still went along with it? You didn't attempt to stop

Develin.”

“We had to act in accordance with the great Necessity,” the Director said. “We were unable to intervene in that manner without jeopardizing the quest in some other way. These matters are very complicated, you understand.”

“I’m beginning to. The fate of the ferrymen springs to mind.”

Brother Lu told the Director about it.

She thought for a moment and then told him: “It would have been better if you had borrowed Olson’s sword and sunk the ferry. They would have cursed you for the act, but it would have saved their lives.”

Brother Lu nodded. “Yes, you’re right of course. I still have so much to learn.”

“You was wonderfully doing,” Elzabet spoke up in his defence. “You is my life saving!”

“Oh, I wish I could stay here forever,” Ellie said. “I have so much to learn, too.”

“Then why don’t you?” asked the Director.

How could she explain the way DreamScape worked? That she came from a faraway realm and that she had to keep going back to it. That this other realm was her real home?”

The Director seemed to understand. “You may return here with your friends whenever you wish and stay as long or as short as you wish. Don’t worry, we won’t go away. We’ll always be here for you, Ellie.

“I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that this land and its people are just a figment of your over-active imagination, aren’t you?”

Mazog had taken the words right off the tip of her tongue.

“Well, they’re not you know. I don’t know how this DreamScape device of your works, but it does allow you access to what we call the Inner Heartlands – and that’s about as real a place as you could ever hope to be.

“So we’ll see you when we see you,” the woman said. “Now, if you’re finished, I think it’s about time you got a good night’s rest, don’t you?”

The Director snapped her fingers.

And in that instant, Ellie shot bolt upright in bed and bleared around the room. The sun was streaming in through the curtains.

It took her a little while to come round and register quite where she was.

And then Ellie realized that she was safely back home in bed.

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**The End**

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